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By J. S. FLETCHER

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THE MISSING CHANCELLOR

THE MISSING CHANCELLOR

BY

J. S. FLETCHER

AUTHOR OF

THE AMARANTH CLUB,
EXTERIOR TO THE EVIDENCE,
SEA FOG, ETC.

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THE MISSING CHANCELLOR

CHAPTER I

MR. PETERS

The first step which led me, a peace-loving aspirant to a quiet literary life, into a bewildering maze of events in which crime figured as much as adventure, was taken, all unconsciously, on a certain April evening some years ago, when, little dreaming of what was to come of it, I walked into the quaint old parlour of the Starboard Light Inn at Rumbelow Point, which is, as everybody knows, an out-of-the-way, romantically situated projection of the Wessex Coast.

It was a habit of mine, that, to drop in there for an hour or so every evening, for the drinking of a glass or two of good ale, the smoking of a pipe, and the exchange of local gossip with whatever company there might be present. That, indeed, was all the human society I got in the course of the twenty-four hours which made a night and a day; lonely as was the situation of the Starboard Light, it was not as much out of the world as was the cottage I was living in, a mile away. I was all alone in that cottage, which I had rented for the spring and summer for an express purpose: the writing of a novel. It was to be a notable performance, that novel, but it was

never written, for when I crossed the threshold of the old inn that evening I walked into the beginning of a story in which circumstances forced me to play a part, whether I would or not, and from that time forward for the next few weeks I never had a chance of setting pen to paper.

As a rule the Starboard Light was quiet enough of an evening; it was, indeed, quiet enough all day long, though it always had sufficient good custom to keep it going and its landlord prosperous, for it was close to a high road and also near a small harbour used a good deal by coasting vessels. That night, however—it was about eight o'clock when I walked in—there was evidence of a certain amount of bustle. To begin with, there was a pleasant smell of something good cooking; to go on with, Withers, the landlord, was uncorking a bottle of claret—Withers, before tenanting the Starboard Light, had been a butler in some big house, and he knew all about good wine; the claret he was busied with was some that he had bought at the sale of a recently deceased local magnate's wine-cellar, and was rarely fetched into evidence; its mere presence denoted something unusual.

"Company, Withers?" I inquired as I dropped into my favourite chair in the pleasant old parlour. "Summer visitors beginning to arrive?"

"Bit too early for that, Mr. Morrison," he answered. "Whitsuntide's their time for starting. No, it's just Mr. Peters—come again." Then, seeing me still

unwise, he added: "Gentleman from London—been here two or three times this last year or two. Geologist—that's his line of amusement—goes about amongst the rocks with a little hammer specimen-hunting."

He marched off with his claret towards the little dining-room, and as he left the intervening doors open, I got a view of Mr. Peters. There was a cheery fire burning in the dining-room grate; Mr. Peters stood in front of it, warming himself in approved British fashion, his back to the blaze and his hands under his coat-tails. He was a little, plump, clean-shaved, rosy-cheeked gentleman, chiefly remarkable for a perky nose and a large pair of spectacles, and it seemed to me that there was something familiar about his face and figure; I must have seen him somewhere, at some time, probably in London, and been reminded at the time, as I was now, of the conventional picture of Mr. Pickwick. But before I could look more closely, Withers retired, closing the door, and Mr. Peters no doubt sat down to his dinner. As Withers come back to the bar-parlour by one door, a man entered by another whom I immediately set down as being connected with Mr. Peters. For one thing, he was a stranger to those parts; for another, he was an admirable specimen of what is called a gentleman's gentleman, soft-voiced, soft-footed, deferential, with a manner as sleek as the suit of black which clothed his spare figure. His face would have

done credit to an undertaker's assistant; his trick of rubbing one hand over the other while he talked, to a shop-walker. He glided rather than walked up to the landlord, and the voice in which he addressed him was smooth and purring—from what I could catch he was making some inquiry as to certain arrangements for Mr. Peters' comfort. Presently he glided out by the opposite door, knocked softly at the door of the dining-room, and opening it, slipped rather than walked in—he was altogether the sort of man who seems to walk on air.

Withers flung a nod after him and looked at me.

"Mr. Peters' valet," he said, explainingly. "Lassiter by name. Been with him a many years, sort of confidential servant. Looks well after his master, does Lassiter; settles everything for him." Then, turning to business, he got behind his counter. "What can I do for you, Mr. Morrison? I tapped a fresh cask of particularly good bitter ale to-day, sir—unusually good! Look at that, now!" he went on, drawing a glass and holding it up for my admiration. "There's a picture for you! Been in our cellars two years, that cask has!" Prime condition!"

I got a glass of Withers' ale and lighted my pipe. For some little time Withers and I had the place to ourselves. Then a gnarled and weatherbeaten native, who, for no reason whatever except that he had owned and run a small coasting vessel in his time, was hon-

oured by the title of Captain Arnell, came in, and after a general remark about the weather, treated himself to a generous allowance of rum, and glass in hand, lumbered over to a particular corner near the hearth which he had come to regard as his own special preserve.

"Any news, Captain?" inquired Withers.

Captain Arnell took a thoughtful pull at his liquor.

"News, says you?" he answered gruffly. "No, there baint any partiklar news, as I knows on. 'Ceptin' that there's one o' them here fine-and-fancy steam yachts, all white paint and gold ornyment, a-come into Strillion Cove yonder, right opposite where this here young gentleman be a-bidin'. Reckon he's seen her—no doubt on't."

"Yes, I've seen her," said I. "Came in this morning."

"This morning it was, sure-ly," assented Captain Arnell. "I see her come round th' headland; her come from th' eastward. I do reckon her's a foreigneerin' craft, that. Looks it!"

"What's she come in here for?" asked Withers.

Captain Arnell's face grew dark.

"Aye, what, says you?" he growled. "And what, says I? And there ain't nobody can give a answer to that, make no doubt. But what I says is, there ought to be a law agin it! No foreigners to come 'ithin the three-miles limit—them's my sentiments. And—common sense. Which, to be sure, is a scarce

commodity in these days, where some folks is concerned."

"Present company always excepted, of course, Captain!" remarked Withers.

"Says nothin' about present company," grunted Captain Arnell. "What I says is, t'aint common sense for to let they foreigneerin' fellers come 'ithin the three-mile limit. And t'ain't, nohow! Spies! that's what they be—spies! A-spyin' out the land, like it says in the Old Book."

This was in the days before the war, and Captain Arnell was one of those thorough-going Englishmen who regarded the alien as poison, and saw in every foreigner an agent of some Power bent on invasion. The keeping out of undesirables was his pet hobby, and once set going on it his tongue would wag until he had drunk his two glasses of rum and smoked his two pipes of tobacco, after the performance of which nightly duty he would go homewards, grumbling over the decadence of the age.

One or two other local celebrities dropped in; Captain Arnell's tongue grew eloquent; as dusk fell, I left him and his audience, and set out for my lonely cottage. And here, in view of what is to come, I had better explain the situation of this corner of the land, in which I had elected to live for a while because of its very solitude. Rumbelow Point is a projection jutting from the mainland well out into the sea in what is practically a triangle. There are no villages

in its expanse, but there are many isolated farmsteads, set in their fields and meadows; on the two coasts there are fishermen's cottages, here and there; near the Starboard Light Inn there is a quay, at which vessels can land and take in cargo; that, with the inn, is on the west side of the promontory. On the east, behind the woods which grow thick as the projection of land narrows, is a deep indentation in the coast-line, called Strillion Cove; opposite this, and overlooking it, stood my cottage. And my way to that, from the Starboard Light Inn, lay almost entirely through the woods. They were old woods, those, chiefly of oak and beech, with a great deal of thick undergrowth. Here and there a rough cart-track, with deep ruts, wound through them; my way lay along a bridle-path, little used, and thickly carpeted with moss. It wound in and out, following the configuration of the land, which was very undulating, and occasionally dropped into deep hollows. It was in descending into one of these that I heard, somewhere ahead of me, but concealed by one of the frequent sharp bendings in the path, men talking; a moment more and I knew that whoever they were, they were talking in a foreign tongue.

I don't know to this day why I suddenly stepped off the path into the thick undergrowth at the side and hid myself. Some instinct prompted it, I suppose; anyway, that was what I did, gliding behind a screen of bushes and standing stock-still. The men

came along, until, through the interstices of leaves and twigs, I could see their figures. It was now something more than dusk and I could not see their faces; what I did make out was that one man was a short, thick-set fellow, the other a head and shoulders taller. They walked slowly, but they were talking quickly and with much gesticulation. But what language they spoke I could not make out. It was not French, not German—nor Italian, nor Spanish; I had a smattering of those tongues myself. A harsh, guttural language—but what?

Almost opposite me the taller of the two men stopped abruptly and began to fumble about his clothing. I heard the scrape of a match, a flame burst out and was applied to a pipe held between teeth that gleamed big and white; in the momentary glow of the flame I got a swift look at the man's face. He was a dark, swarthy complexioned fellow with a heavyish black moustache—a foreigner, and a South European, I felt certain. He passed on, leaving a great cloud of curiously scented tobacco smoke behind him; he and his companion disappeared amongst the trees, still talking volubly.

I set these men down as having something to do with the yacht of which Captain Arnell had spoken in the inn parlour. I had seen that yacht come in to Strillion Cove during the morning, and the old man was right in saying that she had a foreign look about her; it might have been difficult to explain why she

looked foreign, but she did. She was a fine, elegant craft, very shapely, and her freshly painted whiteness, picked out with gold, made a brave show in the spring sunlight. I had paused from my writing to watch her come in, and drop her anchor; she lay about a mile out, just within the mouth of the cove, and as I possessed neither telescope nor field-glasses I could not make any close examination of her. But she flew a flag of a sort utterly unfamiliar to me, and I thought I could distinguish figures on her decks which seemed to be rigged out in fanciful fashion. During the day I had kept an eye on this strange craft, expecting a boat to put off from her, but I had seen nothing.

Instead of going on to my cottage after the two men had passed me, I turned off the bridle-path by a side-track that brought me out above Strillion Cove. There was a bit of moon in the sky, and there, just where she had been all day, lay the strange yacht, her lights burning fore and aft. There was a sound, too, coming across the intervening water—on board her somebody was playing a violin; by standing there in the night-silence and listening intently doubtless I could have caught the tune. But that was not what I had gone there for. There was a stretch of beach below where I stood; I wanted to see if a boat from the yacht had been pulled in anywhere along it. I went down and traversed the whole length and found nothing. This was strange—if, indeed, the two men

I had seen had come ashore from the yacht—for there was nowhere else within my knowledge of the neighbourhood, where a boat could have come in. Yet I felt so certain that the two men had come ashore from the yacht that I came to the conclusion that a boat's crew had landed them and had then pulled away again.

It had grown almost dark, save for the faint moonlight, when I left the beach and turned up to my cottage. I had to go up a narrow lane to reach that; at its head, in the angle formed by it and another lane that led past the front of my garden, stood an ancient building, or range of buildings, now ruinous, that had once belonged to some farmstead long since fallen into disuse. The angle of this grey, lichened masonry gave sharply on the edge of my path where I turned. I heard nothing as I came up to it—nothing approaching, nothing stirring, indeed. But at the turn I ran sharply and full face into a man coming round the other side—Lassiter. The impact knocked off my hat.

"You don't make much sound in your walking!" I said, perhaps a little testily, as I stooped to pick up my property. "Didn't you hear me, either?"

"I beg your pardon, sir," he answered, in the soft, purring voice in which I had heard him address Withers. "I—I may have been—probably was—absorbed, sir. I hope I have not inconvenienced you, sir? I—I walk very light, sir."

"Oh, it's all right!" I replied. "No harm done." This was not true; the rim of my hat, summarily displaced, had grazed the skin off my nose. "Having a walk round, eh?" I added, feeling it necessary to say something.

"I always take a constitutional, sir, after my supper," he answered softly. "My usual habit, sir. The silence and, if I may so express it, the peace of the country conduces to sleep, sir. I sleep well in the country, sir."

"Then it seems superfluous to wish you a good-night!" said I, laughing. "However, I trust you'll have one."

"Thank you, sir," he said gravely. "I wish you a very good-night, sir—with many apologies."

I nodded and went forward to my cottage. But though I purposely kept my ears on the stretch, I couldn't hear Lassiter go away down the stony path up which I had come—certainly he spoke the truth when he said that he walked very light; he was as light-footed as a cat; he might, indeed, have been a shadow gliding about.

Nothing more happened that night. The last thing I saw before drawing my blind was the yacht, riding at anchor, her fore and aft lights glowing in the half-darkness that hung over the Cove. And she was the first thing that I saw in the morning, and I noticed then that she was getting up steam.

I saw Mr. Peters early that morning. He went

past my cottage about half-past-nine o'clock. He was alone. He had a satchel over his shoulder and the shaft of a small hammer stuck out of a corner—I supposed him to be on the prowl for geological specimens, perhaps for fossils. About two hours later, or thereabouts, the white and gold yacht departed, going off to the south-west. After that my look-out was, as usual, the lonely beach and the sailless stretch of sea.

I thought no more of the yacht nor of Mr. Peters; I was hard at work until after five o'clock in the afternoon. Then a sudden soft tapping at my outer door took me to it—to find Lassiter, bland, apologetic, standing in the porch.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said, soft as ever. "I am sorry to intrude, but have you seen anything of my master, sir—Mr. Peters, staying at the Starboard Light Inn, sir? Mr. Peters, sir, went out this morning after breakfast, alone, and should have returned to lunch at one-thirty. He has not returned up to now, sir, and I can hear nothing of him!"

CHAPTER II

THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

I stepped out into the porch, involuntarily looking round about as if I expected to see Mr. Peters hidden somewhere in my garden. As I didn't I turned to his man.

"Is there something very unusual in your master's absence?" I asked. "Is it—what you wouldn't have expected?"

"It is certainly odd, sir," he replied, arching his eyebrows. "Mr. Peters, sir, left word with the landlord—I was engaged at the time he went out—that he would be back to lunch at one-thirty sharp, and Mr. Peters, sir, is a most punctilious gentleman; I have never known him to be a moment late in keeping the most trifling appointment, sir, during the whole period of my service with him. Moreover, sir, I know that Mr. Peters expected telegrams of importance to arrive during the day—there are three awaiting him. But—he had not returned up to an hour ago, when I left the inn."

"You've been looking for him?" I suggested.

"I have been to that part of the coast where he said he was going, sir," replied Lassiter. "That is

round the corner there. But there is no trace of him."

"I saw Mr. Peters pass here about nine-thirty this morning," said I. "He was going in the direction you indicate. But since then I haven't seen him. Still, he may have decided to stay out all day, and he may have gone back to the inn by another route. Perhaps he's there now."

"I hope so, sir; but it is very remarkable that he was not there by half-past one; knowing Mr. Peters as I do, sir, I should say that nothing but an accident could prevent his return. The trouble is, sir, that I do not know where to look for him."

I made one or two suggestions and eventually he went off. The absence of Mr. Peters from his lunch and his inn did not appear to be of any great moment, in my opinion; probably he had wandered farther along the coast than he had intended, or found some absorbingly interesting rocks or strata; possibly he was back again by another route, enjoying a cup of tea and reading his telegrams while his man hunted for him. I did not think he had met with any accident; there were no precipitous cliffs, no dangerous places thereabouts. And after Lassiter had gone away I did not think much about Mr. Peters at all. But when I made my usual call at the Starboard Light at eight o'clock that evening, Mr. Peters was still missing.

I found Withers, Mrs. Withers, and Lassiter in the bar-parlour, at a loss what to do. Mrs. Withers was chiefly concerned about the dinner she had cooked for the missing man; Mr. Peters, it appeared, was something of an epicure, and whenever he stayed at the Starboard Light was in the habit of consulting Mrs. Withers every morning about his bill of fare for the evening. He had given careful orders about the feast of that particular evening; it was all in readiness, said Mrs. Withers, almost tearfully, and there was no Mr. Peters to eat it.

"And as I say," concluded Mrs. Withers, "if Mr. Peters is not home to his dinner, then there's something uncommon serious happened to Mr. Peters, and there you are!"

We certainly were there—and helpless, for no one had the least idea of what could have happened to keep Mr. Peters away from his meat and drink. And as, for some reason, they all seemed to appeal to me for guidance, I tried to get at a clear idea of Mr. Peters' plans for the day. I found that it was his custom, when staying at the Starboard Light, to go out alone on his geologizing and fossil-hunting expeditions, but as a rule he returned to lunch. On this particular occasion he had said positively that he should be back to lunch at one-thirty because he expected a telegram or two from London; he had further mentioned that he was going to the farther

end of Strillion Cove. And during the afternoon Lassiter has been all down and round that way and had neither seen nor heard anything of him.

It was very plain that something had happened to Mr. Peters and that systematic search must be made with the view of discovering his whereabouts. I suggested the police; Withers shook his head, the nearest police station, he said, was three miles away; still, he could telephone to the sergeant there. Meanwhile, he added, there might be some loafers, fishermen and the like, hanging about the neighbouring quay; for a consideration they would doubtless search the point and Strillion Cove thoroughly. Lassiter thereupon went off to enlist volunteers and Mrs. Withers retreated to the kitchen to conserve her neglected dishes as best she could; and left alone with him I gave Withers a glance that was meant to be private and confidential.

"Look here, Withers," said I; "a word with you. There's something odd about this disappearance. What do you know about Mr. Peters?"

Withers made a face which expressed various emotions.

"Well—can't say that I know anything very much, Mr. Morrison," he answered. "Just about as much as one does get to know about visitors. This is the third time he's been here—he came twice last year; stopped two or three days the first time; a week the second; had Lassiter with him both times, as on this

occasion. From London he is, of course. Wealthy gentleman, I should say, and freehanded with his money. I couldn't say, never having heard from either him or his man what he might be—professional gentleman, I should say. Gets a many telegrams while he's here. Sometimes——"

At that moment a telegraph messenger came up to the door on his bicycle, and entering, handed Withers two buff envelopes. Withers held them out towards me when the lad had gone.

"Here's two more," he said. "That's five or six to-day—Lassiter has the others. Yes, he gets a good many in the course of a day. Sometimes I've fancied he must be a racing man. But he don't look that sort—bits of stone and rocks and fossils are more his line. However, that's neither here nor there; this disappearance is odd, as you say, Mr. Morrison."

I looked round, to make sure that no one was listening.

"There may be something very odd about it, Withers," said I. "Look here, now, you remember old Arnell talking about a steam yacht that came into Strillion Cove yesterday? He believed it to be a foreign vessel."

"Oh, I remember that, Mr. Morrison, of course," he replied. "Dead on foreigners is the old Captain; can't abide 'em."

"I saw that yacht several times," said I. "She was lying in the cove right in front of my windows,

about a mile or more out. And—she went off this morning a little before noon, and about a couple of hours after Mr. Peters left your house."

Withers pursed his lips and whistled.

"Whew!" he said. "You don't mean to suggest—eh? Case of—running away, what, Mr. Morrison?"

I hadn't thought of that. It rather interested me that Withers should have thought of it. But, then, Withers was a business man; I wasn't. Running away? It might be that. For anything we knew, Mr. Peters might have excellent reasons for leaving the country; he might have chosen this method of leaving. But my idea had been otherwise.

"Why, no, Withers!" I replied. "I wasn't thinking that, I was thinking that Mr. Peters may have been carried off—kidnapped. You don't know who or what he is, you know, and this is a queer world. Now, I'll tell you something; but first let me ask you a question. Did you have any strangers in here last night?"

I saw at once that he hadn't; the mere question surprised him.

"Strangers?" he said. "No, Mr. Morrison, nobody strange."

"Well," I continued, "I met two men in the woods between here and my cottage who were not only strangers but foreigners; anyhow, they were speaking some foreign language, and it was one that I'd never heard before."

"They didn't come here," he said, shaking his head. "Foreigners, eh? In the woods? They must have come off that yacht. And you say she's gone?"

"Went out of the cove this morning, Withers," said I. "And it looks a bit queer that Mr. Peters should disappear this morning, too! I think you'd better get on to the police and ask them to come along."

"I'll do that," he agreed; "it's the right thing." He went off to the telephone in his private parlour, and after a while came back looking more satisfied. "The sergeant's coming along himself with a couple of constables," he said. "Going to be an all-night job, I expect. If Lassiter's found a man or two——"

Lassiter came back just then with three men in his wake. They, Withers, and myself consulted; then they went off in different directions, each with instructions; Lassiter, hearing that the police were coming, remained behind.

"Two more telegrams for your master," said Withers, handing them over. "Came in just after you'd gone out."

Lassiter took the telegrams, and producing others from an inner pocket, regarded the collection thoughtfully.

"Mr. Peters' telegrams are of importance," he remarked. "He was aware, gentlemen, that several would arrive to-day, which makes me feel that something serious has happened to him. I know that

he meant to be back here by noon to see two telegrams expected during the morning. Those telegrams arrived, gentlemen, but my master did not."

He was about to put his sheaf of buff envelopes away when an idea occurred to me, not wholly unconnected with a growing inquisitiveness.

"Don't you think you ought to open those telegrams?" I suggested. "There may be something——"

He checked me with a curious glance which begun at me and ended at Withers.

"No, sir," he said suavely. "It would be of no benefit, sir. All telegrams received by Mr. Peters, sir, are in cipher."

"In cipher!" I exclaimed. "What—all?"

"All that come here, sir. They are of—of a very confidential nature, sir." He paused, and his manner became guarded. "I am not in a position to say more, sir."

"Oh, of course," I agreed. "But the police will want a good deal of information, you know. If there are any circumstances——"

"I think I shall be able to satisfy the police, sir," he interrupted politely. "There are no circumstances other than quite ordinary that I can think of. I fear my master has met with an accident. To be sure, I searched the rocks down there as closely as I could in the time at my disposal, and without result, but Mr. Peters may have gone farther than I thought.

He is subject to momentary fits of abstraction, gentlemen."

Mrs. Withers, who had just then appeared from the kitchen, put in a contribution to the fund of surmise.

"There's one thing you haven't thought of, Mr. Lassiter," she said, almost cheerfully. "Mr. Peters may have got drowned! It was very warm this morning and he may have gone in swimming. There's that to take into consideration, you know."

Before we could take this suggestion into consideration the police-sergeant, accompanied by two of his men, arrived, and for the next ten minutes we were busily engaged in explaining the situation. As I had predicted, the sergeant wanted a good deal of information, and was disposed to cross-examine Lassiter about his master. But he got no more out of the valet than I had got—Lassiter knew of no reason why Mr. Peters should have vanished so suddenly.

I was beginning to get deeply interested in this affair. I had never had a case of disappearance brought to my personal knowledge before, and I now saw how easily a man can slip clean out of observation, and how difficult it is for searchers to locate him. I could see quite well that the three policemen had no more idea as to what to do than I had myself. What could you do, muttered the sergeant, but go round the district, search the beach, search the woods, and ask at every house and cottage if this gentleman

had been seen? If he had gone away on that yacht, why then, there was nothing to be discovered around Rumbelow Point. Get in touch with ports at which the yacht might call? Just so, but from the description the yacht was a big and powerful one; her first port of call, for all we knew, might be across the Atlantic, in South America.

"And I've heard before to-day of some of these big City gentlemen getting quietly off to the Argentine," remarked the sergeant to Withers and myself. "This one now—you know little about him. My opinion is that yacht came in to take him off. Miles away at sea he is, of course, by now—on her. However, we must take a look around—duty. But we shan't find anything."

He and his men were going out and I was thinking of joining in what seemed likely to be an all-night job when we heard sounds outside the front of the inn that took us all to the door. There, just pulled up before the porch, stood a great, powerful travelling car, all its lights on, and from its door, held open by a servant in livery, was emerging a tall, handsome man, some thirty years of age, who looked as if he was accustomed to exercise authority and exact obedience. He glanced round the group at the inn door as he stepped from the car, and seeing Lassiter, silently signed to him; together they walked a little way into the road. I saw no gesture of surprise on

the part of the stranger at whatever the valet told him. For a few minutes Lassiter did all the talking, the stranger listening with bent head and occasionally nodding as if in assent; eventually I saw Lassiter draw from his pocket the telegrams which had accumulated for Mr. Peters and hand them over to the new arrival, who, still holding them unopened, then turned and came towards the police-sergeant, now all agog with as much curiosity as interest. Mechanically, as if recognizing something superior, the three policemen saluted; the stranger returned the salute just as mechanically.

"Oh, police-sergeant," he said, in a high-bred, musical voice, "I understand you've been called here in consequence of the extraordinary disappearance of Mr. Peters? Just so; well, Mr. Peters must be found, and as quickly as possible, and if he can't be found we must find the explanation. We must turn out the whole countryside to search for him; you can promise an ample reward to any of the country people taking part in the search, whether successful or not. And hadn't you better get more of your men? I understand there's a telephone here—get more help. Don't leave a stone unturned; Mr. Peters must be found. See to everything in that way, will you? Which is the landlord of this inn?"

Withers moved forward; the stranger followed him indoors and into a private room; the police began

to get busy. I turned to Lassiter, who had been exchanging remarks with the chauffeur of the big car.

"Who is the newcomer?" I asked.

"Mr. Rutherford, sir—private secretary to Mr. Peters," replied the valet. "I feel much relieved at his coming, sir; a very capable gentleman, Mr. Rutherford."

At that moment Withers appeared bearing Mr. Rutherford's compliments to me and would I go in to him. I went in and found him opening the telegrams; at sight of me he crushed them into a pocket and gave me a keen look from top to toe.

"The landlord tells me you saw two men hereabouts last night who were foreigners and spoke some language with which you are not acquainted," he said tersely. "He tells me, too, that you are a literary man, and, as he puts it, a scholar. Haven't you any idea what language it was you heard those men speaking?"

"No," I replied, "not the slightest. It was not French, nor German, nor Spanish, nor Italian. I don't think it was any North European language, but it might have been one of the Balkan tongues."

"You didn't comprehend a word that you heard?" he asked.

"Not one," said I.

He nodded, and without further remark politely bowed me to the door.

CHAPTER III

THE SECOND MISSING MAN

I went out of that room feeling considerably puzzled. I had begun to sense an atmosphere of mystery before Rutherford's arrival; Rutherford deepened it. There was something about him that I didn't understand, a suspicion of the hauteur which springs, in some men, from the consciousness of authority; there was also, perhaps more marked, the suggestion of officialism; I didn't like his manner, nor his way of asking questions. Altogether I felt that something was happening of which, up to then, we were only seeing the surface; the various factors were bewildering—Lassiter's guarded fashion of speaking of his master, the cipher telegrams, the big car, Rutherford—it was all of a tendency to mystery of a strange complexion. Add to that the curious happenings of the previous twenty-four hours—the coming and going of the strange yacht, the meeting with the foreigners in the wood, the disappearance of Mr. Peters—all mixed together, there were the ingredients of a hotch-potch of unexplained stuff that my mental digestion was not just then able to assimilate.

Within twenty minutes of Rutherford's arrival and soon after the police had set out on their search for Peters, a new sensation came into evidence. I was standing at the door of the inn, discussing matters with Withers and his wife (Lassiter being closeted with Rutherford in strict privacy in the landlord's private parlour), when a woman came up to us out of the darkness of the surrounding trees. At the end of the inn buildings there was a tap-room, frequented by fishermen and farm labourers; as she came along, we saw this woman pause at its lighted and uncurtained window and peer in through the glass panes as if in search of someone. Evidently not seeing anybody within—the men who had been there earlier in the evening had all set out to join in the search for Peters—she passed on and came up to my companion I recognized her then as a woman named Rachel Mallett, sister of James Mallett, a fisherman of those parts, in whose boat I had often gone out. She was a fine, strapping wench of twenty-two or three, a bit of a beauty in a bold fashion, and well known for her high spirits, but as she drew close to us and into the light of the overhanging lamp, I saw that she was anxious and disturbed and not a little suspicious.

"Mr. Withers!" she broke out as she came up. "Is it true that a gentleman that's stopping here is lost? They're saying so up our way!"

"Well, something of that sort, my girl," answered Withers. "Why, do you know anything about him?"

"No!" she replied sharply, with a shake of her head. "But there's something of that sort happened to Jim. He's never been home all day, and I can't hear tell of him anywhere, nor of anybody having seen him. Has he been here at all during the day, Mr. Withers?"

"No, never seen him at all to-day," said Withers. "When did he disappear?"

Before Rachel Mallett could reply I heard steps behind us, and looking round saw that Rutherford and the valet had come out on the porch. Rutherford evidently caught the last word and drew nearer.

"Another disappearance?" he asked. "What——"

"This young woman says that her brother, a fisherman, is missing," said I. "Since—when, Rachel?"

"He went out after his breakfast to go down to Strillion Cove to see after some lobster pots that he'd set there," she replied. "That would be about nine o'clock. And he ought to have come home to his dinner at twelve. But he never came, and never came to his tea, either—indeed, I haven't seen nor heard of him since he went out. Something's happened to him!"

She began to cry quietly, and Mrs. Withers took her by the arm and led her into the inn. For a moment or two none of us spoke. Then Rutherford broke the silence with a sharp question.

"Who is this man she spoke of?" he asked.

"Her brother, sir, Jim Mallett, a fisherman," replied Withers. "Not the sort that anything would be likely to happen to, eh, Mr. Morrison? Pretty well able to take care of himself, I think, Jim Mallett."

Rutherford looked at me; plainly, he was wanting information.

"Jim Mallett," I said, "is a particularly fine and healthy specimen of mankind, a big, athletic fellow, strong as an elephant. Withers means that he's not likely to have been drowned, or to have fallen over the rocks, or to have let himself in for any accident."

"Just so," muttered Withers. "But—he's a sober young chap and regular in his habits, and if he told his sister he'd be in for his dinner, it's a queer thing he wasn't in. And what I'd like to know," he added giving Rutherford a sharp questioning glance, "what I'd like to know, gentlemen, is—has this anything to do with the disappearance of Mr. Peters? Because if it has, all I've got to say is that there's something uncommonly queer going—or has gone on!"

He turned into the inn without waiting for a reply from any of us, and Rutherford looked at me.

"I suppose the best thing I can do is to join in the search," he said. "Perhaps, if you don't mind and as you know the district, you'd give me the benefit of your guidance? Mr. Peters must be found, or I must get at some clear idea of what's happened to him."

"I was just setting out to look round two or three

places myself," I replied. "Come with me, if you like. We can't do much in the woods, and I believe the police and the men they've got together have already gone there, but we can follow certain roads and lanes and the beach."

"These two men shall help," he remarked, and crossed over to the car, which still stood with its attendants before the door. "And you'd better come, too, Lassiter," he went on, when he had given his orders and come back. "That will make five of us, and there are already a good many men out with the police—surely we can find out something or other."

I presently led them off towards Strillion Cove, purposely taking the route followed by Peters that morning. There was a fair amount of moonlight, and we could see well on the roads and on the sands. But when we had pursued our search for several hours, and, indeed, until daylight had begun to break beyond the headlines to the east, we had found no trace of either of the missing men.

At five o'clock in the morning, being near it, I took Rutherford into my cottage and made some coffee. I showed him, from my front windows, where the strange yacht had remained at anchor for twenty-four hours; it had seemed to me that from his first hearing about it he had been unusually inquisitive about the yacht. He began to talk of it afresh.

"You are inclined to connect the yacht with the disappearance of Mr. Peters, eh?" he suggested as he

sipped his coffee. "That's your opinion, isn't it?"

"They fit in, don't they?" I replied. "Mr. Peters is spirited away—at least, it looks very much as if he had been—while the yacht is here. Then the yacht departs suddenly. Coincidence, perhaps, but suspicious. Of course, I don't know any reason why Mr. Peters should be carried off, either by his own wishes or against them. Perhaps you do?"

But he made no reply, save by an ambiguous nod which probably meant that he saw my meaning.

"The other man?" he said, after a pause. "What about the other man?"

"Mallett? I've been thinking about that," I answered. "Mr. Peters, of course, knew Mallett. Mallett is well known about here, a popular fellow. Now, supposing Mr. Peters was attacked by some party from that yacht, shouted for help, and Mallett, from near at hand, went to his assistance, the kidnapper may have carried off Mallett as well as Mr. Peters. If I knew any reason why Mr. Peters should be kidnapped, I should be more certain about both him and Mallett."

But again he refused to rise to the bait, and I could see that he was not going to tell me anything; if he did know of any reason for the carrying away of his employer he was minded to keep it strictly to himself.

"There may be nothing at all in what that girl said about her brother," he remarked suddenly. "He may have gone out to sea, fishing."

"No," said I. "Jim Mallett told his sister he'd be home to his dinner."

"There's such a thing as changing one's mind," he objected. "It may be—hullo, here's one of the policemen coming up your path."

I looked out and saw Marshall, our local police-constable, and went out to the porch to meet him. Marshall looked upset, and he gave me a queer glance.

"We've found him, Mr. Morrison," he said in a low voice. "Just now—close by here."

"Mr. Peters?" I exclaimed.

He gave me a still queerer glance, significant of something.

"No," he answered; "we've seen nothing of him. Mallett!"

I heard Rutherford come along the passage behind me; he came close up, and I heard, too, a slight catch in his breath as he spoke—before I could.

"That fisherman?" he asked. "Well?"

Marshall's voice sank still lower.

"Dead, sir! Shot—shot dead, right through the heart, sir. So—so the sergeant makes out."

I turned and glanced at Rutherford. In spite of his self-possession, which, I had come to see already, was a well-cultivated quality, he had turned pale, and his lips parted a little without a sound coming from them; he looked like a man who is unexpectedly faced with a disconcerting problem. But in a second he recovered himself and turned sharply on me.

"He says—close by here. You told me just now you were here in your cottage writing, all yesterday morning—you didn't hear a shot?" he demanded. "In an utterly quiet district like this, eh?"

"I heard nothing," said I. "No sound of a shot, anyway. But what do you mean by close by, Marshall? Where is it?"

"Just through the wood there, sir, near that narrow sunk lane that leads to the highroad," replied Marshall "If you'll come along, sir."

We followed him at once, through the wood that flanked on my bit of garden, and in the direction of the coast on the extreme edge of the promontory. And we soon found that Marshall's idea of what was what he considered close by was a relative one; the spot to which he led us was at least five hundred yards from my cottage. We heard nothing until we got to it; the men gathered there, if they were talking at all, were doing so in low murmurs. Breaking through a final screen of undergrowth we came across them, at a place where there was a slight clearing—the sergeant and his other policemen, Lassiter, the two men who had come with Rutherford in the car, two or three of the men who had left the tap-room of the Starboard Light to help in the search. They stood about, staring, with varying expressions, at the dead man, over whose face one of them had laid a handkerchief. The sergeant came forward.

"This man found him, gentlemen," he said in a low

voice, pointing to one of the fishermen. "We were just about giving up this quarter—we'd been pretty well over every yard of it. He's been shot—shot dead at close quarters, I should say, for his clothing's burnt where the bullet went in. And look here—here's something I haven't touched and shan't till a doctor's seen him and our inspector's had a look at it. This way, gentlemen."

He led us up to Mallett's body, and motioning us to stoop, pointed to something firmly grasped in the clenched left hand. That something was a tuft—slight, but unmistakable—of light chestnut coloured human hair.

"This man's been shot while he was having a hand-to-hand fight with another man," remarked the sergeant. "I figure it out that he'd got a tight hold of his man by the hair, and that the other man drew a revolver and shot him at close quarters while they were actually grappling together. Look here, gentlemen, that's where the bullet went in—right through the heart, no doubt—you see, the cloth of his jacket is singed. Clear murder this, gentlemen. But," he added, as he rose from his knee at the dead man's side, "he wasn't shot here. He's been carried, or, rather, dragged here, after he was shot. Look at this," he went on. "We've been careful not to move about here since finding him. You can see where the body's been dragged across the ground, through the bushes. Now, follow me and I'll show you something else."

We followed him, carefully avoiding the clearly marked track he pointed out, through the undergrowth to the edge of the wood, coming out at a point some twenty yards farther on, where a thin hedgerow divided it from a lane sunk deep in the land. I knew that lane well enough; it communicated with a main-road that ran from the village at the mainland border of the promontory to the extremity of Strillion Cove. Once in it, the sergeant pointed to certain signs on the grass and the sandy surface where no grass grew.

"Look at those marks," he said. "There's been a struggle, a fight here. Footmarks on the sand, grass trampled, plants crushed flat. And there, gentlemen, is blood. And there's more blood along the way by which Mallett's dead body was dragged from here to where we found it—blood in several places."

I saw all that he pointed out—the suggested horror of it made a sickening contrast to the beauty of the surroundings. The morning sun was well up by that time, and in the neighbouring woods the birds were singing gaily; at the end of the lane there was a vista of yellow sand and blue sea; everything was full of springtide charm—and here were the evidences of crime, murder, brutality. I looked at Rutherford, who, from the moment of our leaving my cottage, had made no remark. There was that about his expression which made me sure that he was thoroughly puzzled—he looked like a man who is trying to solve a problem or who is obviously taken aback by an unfore-

seen development. He stood staring at the things pointed out by the sergeant as if they were figments of a dream; there was undeniable bewilderment in his tones when at last he spoke.

"Mr. Peters?" he said. "What's become of him?"

The sergeant turned on him sharply.

"Do you know what I think, sir?" he said. "I don't know who Mr. Peters is, nor what reason there can be for what I'm thinking, but, in my opinion, Mr. Peters was seized in this lane by men who wanted him —and have got him. I think this poor fellow Mallett was near and came to his rescue, and made a fight of it—with the result we know. That's about it, sir—kidnapping and—murder."

Rutherford nodded his comprehension.

"What's to be done?" he asked.

"There's no end to be done," replied the sergeant, with a stern look. "I shall get the Chief Constable and the inspector and a doctor here before we move Mallett's body. Then there'll be the coroner to inform and—eh, we've got our work set, I assure you, gentlemen. I wish it had been anything but this—a fine, well-behaved young fellow lost his life."

He turned back to the wood, and Rutherford followed him. As for me, I said I would go on to my cottage and make ready some breakfast for all of them; to reach the cottage, I went round by the lane in which we were then standing, alone. And I had not gone many yards down the lane, to a point where

a foot-path led towards my garden gate, when I saw, all by chance, an object lying in the grass of the wayside which, I knew at once, had recently been dropped there accidentally. I picked it up—a small, leather-bound memorandum book, dew-stained, but obviously brand new.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMONED TO TOWN

I hurried that memorandum book into my pocket, and kept it there until I was once more in my cottage with the door closed. But then I drew it out and took a careful look at it, feeling sure all the time that it had been dropped in the narrow lane by someone who had something to do with the mysterious proceedings of the last twenty-four hours. There was nothing remarkable in the appearance of the thing. It was one of those leather-bound pocket-books, of a size convenient for carrying in a waistcoat pocket, for which you can get a refill of blank pages when the first supply is done with. But this had never had a refill; it was a new book, recently purchased, I thought, though the cover was a little stained and damaged by exposure to the dew of the night just spent. When I opened it, I saw at once that the book had never been used; there was not a single entry in it; the pencil that fitted into a groove at the side had apparently never been withdrawn from its sheath. There were two pockets in the covers; one contained a slip of paper giving particulars of some system of insurance to owners of this line of memorandum book;

there were blank spaces in that slip which owners were told to fill in. They had not been filled in by the owner of this book. I was disappointed to see that they hadn't; a name and address there might have formed a clue. But I had better luck in the other pocket. That contained a visiting card, which I drew out and stared at closely.

MR. RICHARD STEPPE.
Daily Planet.

I knew nothing whatever of Mr. Richard Steppe—I had never heard his name, though I myself before settling down at Rumbelow Point to cultivate literature (or fiction, which is perhaps, not quite the same thing) had done a good deal of journalism as a free-lance, and had met scores of men attached to various newspapers. But I knew the *Daily Planet* well enough; I had done work for the *Daily Planet,* which has, as everybody knows, one of the biggest circulations in the world. Mr. Richard Steppe, of the *Daily Planet*—very good; this was doubtless the property of Mr. Richard Steppe. But what had Mr. Richard Steppe been doing down here at Strillion Cove?

The putting of that question to myself and the thinking over its answer made me resolve to say nothing about my discovery to anyone, for the time being, lest I drag an innocent man into an awkward situation. Steppe might have been down in my neighbourhood on a day's holiday. Although we were

far out of the beaten track, Rumbelow Point was not unknown to tourists; motorists ran down to it from the mainland; cyclists and pedestrians explored it. All these were few and far between; still, they came. Steppe, whoever he was, and if he owned this memorandum book, might have wandered down here and dropped the book out of his pocket. It might have nothing whatever to do with the mystery gathering around the disappearance of Peters and the murder of poor Mallett—nothing whatever. And again—it might. But—at present—I was going to keep the fact of its existence to myself.

I prepared some breakfast of a simple sort for the men in the wood, and while they ate and drank listened to their talk. That was chiefly done by the police; Rutherford said little; his manner still suggested that he was thoroughly bewildered. He and Lassiter talked now and then, apart; it struck me that the valet was as much bewildered as the secretary. I became puzzled myself later in the day, at the Starboard Light, where, about noon, there was a gathering of the big-wigs of the local police—the Chief Constable himself, various inspectors, a couple of detectives, and so on. There was a great deal of talk exchanged between these men and Rutherford; later on, I was summoned to a private interview with the Chief Constable and Rutherford, who had previously been closeted in strict privacy in Withers' parlour. They pumped me dry about the men in the wood.

But I got nothing out of them, nor gathered anything from the nature of the questions they put to me, and when they finally dismissed me I had formed the impression that Rutherford had let the Chief Constable into some secret, and that the secret was going to be kept.

That impression was deepened to a considerable extent next day. Wherever Mr. Peters might be, carried away on that yacht, spirited off into the country amongst the hills, or dead and buried in the sand dunes of Strillion Cove, Mallett was dead, and obviously murdered, and the coroner had got to hold an inquest on his body. That inquest was opened at the Starboard Light within thirty-six hours of the finding of Mallett, and it was attended by a great many people, for the news of the murder had spread far and wide, and a spirit of intense curiosity had been roused. But there was no curiosity satisfied—the proceedings, in my opinion, had all been arranged; they were cut-and-dried. Indeed, at the very beginning, the coroner announced that all he intended to do that day was to take evidence of identification, so that the dead man could be interred, and then to adjourn the inquiry pending further investigation by the police. Within a quarter of an hour of the opening the adjournment took place, and all that the inquisitive had learned was that Mallett went out to look to his lobster pots one morning and was found murdered the next. No other circumstances were re-

ferred to, and the name of Mr. Peters was not mentioned.

I had been under the impression that my evidence would be wanted at that inquest, and had, of course, walked up to the Starboard Light to be in readiness to give it. There would have been nothing new about it, to be sure: Withers, the police-sergeant, various local residents, knew what I knew about the foreigners I had met in the wood, for I had talked freely on that subject to several people, in connection with the disappearance of Peters. When I found I was not wanted and that nothing was going to be told by anybody on that occasion, I went away—to be hailed outside the inn by a couple of reporters, eager for copy. Perhaps out of a fellow-feeling for them, perhaps because I felt that truth was for some reason or other being kept back, I told them all I knew of what they had already styled the "Rumbelow Point Mystery," and at greater length, and with more detail, than I had expended before. They seized on the story with avidity, and never asked me a question till they had got it all down. But then they were free to talk a bit.

"You think, then, that Peters was carried off on that yacht?" asked one.

"I think it very likely," said I.

"And that Mallett was murdered by the men who carried Peters off?" suggested the other.

"That seems highly probable. I take it that Mal-

lett went to the assistance of Peters and was shot dead for his pains."

"Peters wasn't mentioned at this inquest," said the first reporter. "Why?"

"I don't know," said I. "Ask Mr. Rutherford."

"We've been to Rutherford. Rutherford shut us up—said the matter is in the hands of the police."

"The Peters affair and the Mallett affair seem to be all one," observed the second reporter. "Look here—who is Peters?"

"I know no more than you do," I answered. "All I know is that Mr. Peters was a visitor at the Starboard Light Inn; that he was a presumably well-to-do man, who ran a secretary, Rutherford, and a valet, Lassiter; that he was an ardent geologist, and that he's mysteriously disappeared. If you're going to make a feature of this affair, I should advise going for that yacht. Where is it?"

They evidently took my advice on that matter, for when I opened my two London papers next day I found that almost the whole of my conversation with the two reporters was given and that the mysterious yacht was done full justice. Who was she? Whence had she come? Where had she gone? Where was she now? But beyond mentioning his strange disappearance as coinciding with the presence of the yacht at Strillion Cove and the murder of Mallett, there was little about Mr. Peters, and the names of his secretary and his valet were not mentioned.

It was in the main street of our nearest town, Wickhampton, that I saw all this in the papers, and I had only just glanced it over when I ran into one of the big pots of the police—an inspector who had been down at Rumbelow Point all the previous day. He gave me a look which had something of reproof in it.

"Pity you told all that to those newspaper men, Mr. Morrison," he said. "I see it's in all the London papers, and in the local daily, too."

"And why is it a pity?" I asked.

He gave me another look—this time a sly one.

"The present policy is—privacy," he answered. "There are reasons. That's why the coroner's inquest was adjourned as soon as possible. The affair's in our hands, Mr. Morrison. When we're ready, the inquest will be—well, rather more interesting."

"Are you trying to trace that yacht?" I inquired.

He smiled and moved off, throwing me a word over his shoulder.

"Private, too, that!" he said. "Police affair!"

I waved the newspapers at him.

"Public!" I retorted maliciously. "Everybody knows, now!"

I was not at all repentant as regards what I had done. I had not been asked by anybody to hold my tongue, and I was greatly exercised in mind as to what was being done in the way of finding Mr. Peters; as far as our own neighbourhood was concerned, nothing was being done. Rutherford had left for London

as soon as the coroner had adjourned his inquiry; Lassiter, apparently at a loss for orders, had followed him. If the police were doing anything, we heard and saw nothing of it.

But on the day following my meeting with the reproachful inspector, I saw the result of my talk with the reporters. The first thing I saw on opening my newspaper, under the heading which had now become familiar, was a paragraph in leaded type:

"As a result of the interview of our representative with Mr. Colin Morrison the other afternoon, at Rumbelow Point, in reference to the presence of a strange steam yacht in Strillion Cove a few nights ago, we have received a telegram from Sir Robert Hartle-Rixborough, from Plymouth, saying that the yacht referred to was his, the *Golden Mermaid,* with himself on board. Sir Robert says that he put into Strillion Cove for twenty-four hours for some necessary repairs; that during that time no member of his crew even went ashore; and that amongst his crew there are no foreigners; the men seen by Mr. Morrison in the woods at Rumbelow Point, accordingly, had not come from the *Golden Mermaid.* As Sir Robert Hartle-Rixborough had no communication with the shore during his stay in Strillion Cove, he knows nothing of the sensational affair now associated with that locality, and had not heard of it until he received newspapers on his arrival in Plymouth Sound."

I read this paragraph over two or three times before I realized what it meant. But the meaning, of

course, was clear enough: the men I had seen in the woods were not from the yacht; Peters had not been carried off in the yacht. Who, then, were those men? And where was Peters?

Nothing occurred during the next few days that helped to an answer to these questions. I do not know what the police were doing; I heard nothing of them. There was gossip in our neighbourhood; it was chiefly about Mallett: the disappearance of Peters, a mere casual visitor, was not of such importance to the native, of course, as the murder of one of themselves. Indeed, I heard no mention of the Peters affair after reading Sir Robert Hartle-Rixborough's communication until one morning, about ten days after the murder, a smart car drew up at my garden gate and set down a suave and smiling gentleman who requested the favor of a few minutes' private conversation with me on the subject of Mr. Peters' disappearance.

I felt somewhat dubious about this; I had not forgotten what the police-inspector had said to me at Wickhampton. Nevertheless, I invited my visitor into the cottage and drew a chair forward for him.

"May I know whom I have the pleasure of receiving?" I inquired, trying to be as formal as possible. "I will say why I ask—I have been requested, rather peremptorily, to hold my tongue about the Peters affair. By the police, of course."

He smiled at that.

"Quite so, Mr. Morrison," he said. "The local

police. But as regards myself, I am from the Home Office--consider me as the Home Office—my name is immaterial. Yours, on the contrary, has been the subject of much discussion and speculation there—at the Home Office and—elsewhere—for some days. And I am here to ask you if you will be good enough to go back with me to town. The truth is, a certain very important personage is anxious to have a talk with you—privately—about your connection with this Peters affair."

"But I have no connection with it!" I exclaimed. "That is——"

"That is," he interrupted with a smile, "that is—except that you saw two men in a wood who, from their speech, you believed to be foreigners. And that is exactly what the important personage I referred to just now wants to talk to you about. He has serious reasons for his desire, and I hope you will come with me, Mr. Morrison."

I stood staring at him for a moment.

"This is a very mysterious business," said I at last.

"You are quite right in that," he answered. "But —much more mysterious than you have any idea of. You'll come?"

I went—after sprucing myself up and putting on town clothes. We were three hours on the way, and during the whole of that time my companion never referred again to the Peters affair, though he talked entertainingly enough of other matters: books, art,

sport. But when at last we had crossed Westminster Bridge and were turning into Parliament Street, he suddenly laid a hand on my arm and bent towards me confidentially.

"Mr. Morrison," he said, "I will now tell you what is before you. The person who is anxious to have a strictly confidential talk with you is the Prime Minister—Mr. Alstone!"

CHAPTER V

A CABINET SECRET

I don't know if my guide and companion expected me to show alarm, or, at any rate, surprise at this announcement: I flatter myself that I showed nothing. The truth was that his words came as a not unexpected illumination. From almost the very beginning of the Peters affair, I felt sure that it had all the elements of some unusual mystery in it; now I was surer, to the verge of certainty. Mr. Peters was *somebody!* Perhaps he was a foreign potentate—a President, or something of that sort, relaxing in England. Perhaps he was a prince in his own country—I had had an idea when I got a mere glimpse of him in Withers' dining-room that his face was familiar: it might be that I had seen a photograph of him at some time or other in one of the illustrated newspapers. Anyway, if our Prime Minister was concerning himself about Mr. Peters, Mr. Peters must be a personage of considerable importance.

"Oh, indeed!" I said. "I suppose Mr. Alstone wishes to ask me questions on my knowledge of this affair?"

"Precisely!" he answered, with a laugh. "And as

Mr. Alstone was in his time a very eminent man at the Bar, you'll no doubt find him an expert at examining a witness. My advice to you, Mr. Morrison, is to treat him with full confidence—and openness."

"Why not?" said I. "I've nothing to keep back. The pity of it is—considering the circumstances—that I have so little to tell!"

"The importance of what you have to tell may be much more serious than you're aware of," he answered dryly. "Well—here we are!"

He stopped the car at the end of Downing Street; together we walked along to No. 10. I had seen the outside of that historic residence, the official dwelling-house of every Prime Minister of Great Britain from the time of Sir Robert Walpole, a hundred-and-one times, I suppose, in strolling about Westminster, but I had never thought to enter it. Now, under the wing of my companion, I entered it easily enough—and was presently left to myself to await admission to the presence. But not for long; in five minutes my guide was back and smilingly beckoning me to follow. He led me to another room, ushered me inside, and, as he himself withdrew, murmured my name.

"Mr. Colin Morrison, sir."

The Prime Minister looked up from a desk, at which he was writing. I had seen him in the flesh a score of times; in the House; in the street; at various gatherings; his fine face and white hair were familiar enough. As his shrewd eyes took me in he gave me a

friendly nod in answer to my bow and, his hand still grasping his pen, pointed to an elbow chair close by him.

"Thank you for so promptly coming to see me, Mr. Morrison," he said. "Sit down." He looked me all over with a quick, searching glance as I obeyed him. "Mr. Colin Morrison, eh? Your name is familiar. A Colin Morrison was a fellow-undergraduate of mine at Oxford."

"My father, sir," said I. "I have often heard him speak of that."

"Bless me!" he exclaimed, showing instant interest. "And where is your father now?"

"Vicar of Medlington, in Northumberland, sir. He has held the living thirty years."

"I remember—I remember—he went into the Church. And you?" he went on, glancing quickly at a slip of paper which he picked up. "You write, eh?"

"I am beginning to write, sir," I replied. "Until a few months ago, when I retreated to Rumbelow Point with the idea of writing, I had been doing free-lance journalism in London for three or four years."

"Yes?" he said. "And—what do you want to write?"

"Fiction, sir," I answered.

He smiled—giving me a knowing glance.

"From what I have heard of it, I should think you would find a promising plot for a novel in this Peters

affair, wouldn't you?" he said. "Perhaps—before you've done with it, you will. However, let us talk about it as a non-fictional matter. I sent for you, understanding from what I have read in the newspapers that you are the man who, the night before the disappearance of Mr. Peters, encountered certain men in a wood, whom you believed to be foreigners. Now, will you tell me, in your own way, everything that you know about this affair? Take your own time—give me every detail that you think pertinent. I want to be informed at first-hand."

He settled himself in his chair and listened intently while I told him the whole story as it had presented itself to me: he let me go on to the end without interruption. And when I had finished he remained silent for a few minutes, evidently thinking over what I had told him.

"Your first conclusion was that Mr. Peters had been carried off in that yacht?" he said at last.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"That theory, of course, was put an end to by the telegram from the owner of the yacht," he went on. "I know Sir Robert Hartle-Rixborough a little—he's a man of his word, and if he says that no members of his crew went ashore at Strillion Cove and that he had no foreigners on board we may take it that what he says settles that point. But—Mr. Peters has disappeared! And you saw men who, in your opinion, were decidedly foreigners. And an unfortunate man

was murdered, without any ostensible reason or motive. I take it that your present theory is that Mr. Peters, while pursuing his geological researches, was attacked, probably by the men you saw in the wood, that Mallett heard his cry for help, went to his assistance, was shot dead, and that the miscreants then carried Mr. Peters away—most likely in a swift motor-car. Is that your theory?"

"I can't think of any other, sir," I answered.

"Well, it is one in which it is difficult to pick a hole," he remarked. "But now as to clues. I see two. I understand that the murdered man, Mallett, was found to be grasping some strands, a tuft, something of that sort, of human hair of a somewhat unusual shade of colour. That is a clue. The other is that you yourself can recognize one, at any rate, of the two men you saw in the wood. You are sure of that?"

"Yes, sir—I should identify him without hesitation."

"Well, all that is something to go on," he said. "Now, do you know of anything else—anything which may have appealed to you, but which you have not thought it necessary to tell the police about?"

"There is one matter, sir," I replied. "A matter of which, until now, I have not spoken to anyone, for reasons which I will give you." I drew out the memorandum book and showed him the card hidden

away in its pocket, and proceeded to tell him the story of my discovery of it in the lane near the scene of the murder, and my reasons for keeping that discovery secret. "If this was dropped by one of Mr. Peters' assailants, sir," I added, "it should be a most important clue; if not, it is nothing."

He sat silent for a moment, fingering the card.

"Mr. Richard Steppe, *Daily Planet*," he said, at last, ruminatively. "Presumably—a journalist. You have done journalistic work—do you know this name?"

"No, sir—I have never heard his name."

"Do you know anything of the paper?" he asked.

"Oh yes, I know the *Daily Planet* very well, sir," I replied. "I have worked for it."

"I meant—do you know men on it?—of whom you could make inquiry about this man—Steppe?" he continued. "In confidence—eh?"

"I can easily find out all about Steppe, sir," I said. "And find Steppe himself—if he is a Fleet Street man."

He nodded, and afterwards remained silent for a while, eventually rising from his chair and beginning to pace the room, his hands thrust in his trousers pockets. He walked up and down for some minutes, and at last came to a halt on the hearthrug, immediately facing me.

"I think, young man, that I can repose confidence

in you," he said, again eyeing me over. "I think, too, that you can be immensely useful to me. Now, consider what I'm going to say to you as being in the essence of an absolutely confidential communication, not to be divulged to anyone—that is, unless I so direct. You understand?"

"Yes—if you wish to trust me," I replied.

"Very well," he went on, with a smile that had something of the whimsical about it. "You saw Mr. Peters at the inn you have mentioned—the Starboard Light? Did—did you think—had you any feeling that you had seen him before—that his face was familiar?"

"Yes, sir," I answered promptly. "Both face and figure. I thought I had seen him in London. Or—his photograph in some paper. Something of that sort."

"But you didn't positively identify him as Mr. Peters or as—somebody else?"

"Oh no! It was—just an impression."

He paused for a moment, and again he smiled.

"You read the papers, of course?" he said. "Did you read, a few days ago, an announcement to the effect that Mr. Petherwin, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, is indisposed, and that the introduction of his Budget, due two or three days since, had been postponed in consequence?"

"Yes, I saw that, sir," I assented.

He pursed up his mobile lips for a moment; there

was a grim smile about their corners when he relaxed them.

"Mr. Petherwin," he said tersely, "is Mr. Peters!"

He looked at me then as a conjuror might look at a schoolboy to whom he has just shown one of his very best tricks; there was an undeniable "There!-what-d'ye-think-of-that?" air about him. But I don't think I showed any evidence of surprise.

"I expected something of that sort, sir," I said. "I couldn't quite see why anybody should want to carry off Mr. Peters if Mr. Peters was merely an ordinary citizen having a few days' holiday. Since things developed, I have felt certain that Mr. Peters was—somebody."

"I don't think many other people have, though," he remarked. "The fact is known to certain people, of course, but I don't think it's even suspected by, say, the newspaper folk. And nothing must be done that would put them in the way of suspecting it—at present, anyway."

"May I ask if anything is known of Mr.—shall I say Peters?—other than what I know, sir?" I inquired. "The police, I suppose——"

"Certain of the police authorities are in the secret, of course," he said. "No—nothing is known. We have no clue whatever. Mr. Petherwin, whose official residence, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, is, as you know, next door to this, is an old bachelor who is as devoted to geological pursuits, hunting fossils, and

that sort of thing, as he is pre-eminent in the higher finance. He has always had a bad habit of slipping away, accompanied by his man, Lassiter, for a few days at a time, incognito, to indulge in his hobby. This time he carried away with him his Budget secrets—no doubt on a sheet or two of paper—in his pocket. My own firm belief is that he has been kidnapped by a gang of financial crooks who wished to acquaint themselves with his Budget proposals. They appear to have been successful."

"Except that they have made one irretrievable mistake, sir," said I. "They murdered a man!"

"True!" he said. "That, no doubt, never entered into their calculations, and through that murder we may get at them. But the police have no clue so far—except those I spoke of. The whole affair is surprisingly mysterious. I know a little of Petherwin's habits, and I know that when he went off on these excursions his destination wasn't known to a soul—not even to his valet till the tickets were taken!"

"His private secretary knew, sir," said I. "At any rate, he knew of this."

"Rutherford?" he said. "Oh yes—certainly Rutherford knew—Petherwin, of course, had to leave an address with him. But no officials knew. The public knew nothing. Yet—Petherwin, as Peters, was undoubtedly tracked to this out-of-the-way place, and has been carried away from it, and is, at present,

hopelessly lost. And his captors have no doubt secured particulars of his Budget proposals."

"Has any evidence that they have been made manifest in the money market yet, sir?" I made bold to inquire.

"Ah, a good point!" said he. "I see you understand, Morrison—good! No—I don't think so. But—Petherwin must be found. Under the surface, we are moving heaven and earth to find him—up to now with no result. Well, now, you will keep all this to yourself, and using all the care and circumspection you can, you'll find this man Richard Steppe and see if he can tell you anything that will be of use. Communicate anything you discover to me, and to me only—and not in writing. If you have anything to tell, come here—I shall give orders for your admittance. Do you need any funds for your investigations? No? Very good, but if and when you do, pray tell me. I think that's all—and—be secret!"

He gave me a squeeze of his hand, nodding and smiling, and I bowed myself out, and seeing and hearing nothing of my recent guide, made for the door. I was in a bit of a mental whirl by that time. Was I to look on myself henceforth—for the time being, at any rate—as a sort of secret service agent, a species of ex-officio detective, or what? Anyhow, I was in for it—I had pledged my word to and taken the instructions of the Prime Minister.

I had an excellent opportunity of testing myself,

there and then. The door of No. 10 had scarcely closed upon me—indeed, I was still on its step—when that of No. 11 opened, and out of it came—Rutherford!

CHAPTER VI

THE NAMELESS AGENT

In spite of his official training and his natural reserve, Rutherford was totally unable to conceal his astonishment at seeing me on the Prime Minister's doorstep; indeed, I never saw a man manifest so unmistakably the obvious signs of being thoroughly taken aback. The sight of his surprise stiffened me into nonchalance; I gave him a careless nod. He spoke—stammeringly.

"Hullo—hullo!" he said. "Wh-what are you doing there?"

I purposely stared at him as if surprised, politely surprised, at his question.

"Oh, nothing!" I replied carelessly. "Mr. Alstone and my father are old friends."

He stared at me then.

"Oh!" he said. "Oh! Then you didn't——"

"Sorry I can't stay," said I, interrupting him without ceremony. "Pressed for time—got a train to catch!"

I turned on my heel and left him—I had a train to catch, but it was only on the Underground, round the corner, and if I'd missed it, there would have

been another in three minutes. I wondered as I hurried away if Rutherford would accept what I had said as a valid excuse for my presence at No. 10, Downing Street—or if he'd try to find out what my real business had been there. However, if he did try to unearth anything he would fail; if it was certain he got nothing out of me, it was equally certain he would get nothing out of Mr. Alstone.

My job now was to find Mr. Richard Steppe—whoever he might be. Probably he was one of a crowd of young newspaper men. Still, he had printed the name of the *Daily Planet* on his card; therefore, he was traceable. But I was not going direct to the *Daily Planet* office to ask about him. I knew better how to find him than that, in view of the delicacy and secrecy impressed upon me by Mr. Alstone. And when I got out of the Underground train which had carried me and my contriving wits from Westminster to Blackfriars it was not to the *Daily Planet* office, close by though it was, that I turned, but to a certain tavern in Fleet Street, where, at that hour of the day—four o'clock in the afternoon—I knew I should be sure to meet more than one *Daily Planet* man.

There were several *Daily Planet* men in that hostelry when I walked into the big bar, and there was one whom I knew intimately—an Irishman named Geoghegan, who welcomed me with great cordiality and got me into a corner, to celebrate our meeting.

Geoghegan was the sort of man who, if you have not met him for months, wants to tell you all that he has been doing with himself, and it was some time before I could slew him round to what I wanted to know. But he exhausted his chapter of autobiography at last and I plumped him with a direct question.

"Look here, Geoghegan," said I, "do you know anybody named Richard Steppe?"

"Oh, I do!" said he. "Dick Steppe, a young feller that's lately come on the Street—sort of free-lance feller. He's done stuff for the paper—now and then. Oh, indeed, I know Steppe!"

"I've seen something of his that I'd like to talk to him about," said I. "Can you put me in his way?"

"Indeed, and I can," said he. "But it'll not be in this bar, my boy, nor in any other. He's by way of being a teetotaller, is Steppe, and 'tis at the tea-and-bun shop you'll find him at this hour, and maybe he's a wise man—anyway, the Fleet Street whisky gets worse and worse, and I'm told it never had a good name!"

"What tea-and-bun shop?" I asked.

" 'Tis an elegant new establishment, lower down the street, that they call the Chrysanthemum," replied Geoghegan. "And there about this time, as a rule, ye'll be finding Steppe, worshipping the pretty waitresses—he's young, my boy, young!—and eating

muffins. Sure, I'll take you there, and just now—leastways, when we've had another whisky, bad as it is. And did ye ivver taste a drop of the reel stuff in the counthry where alone 'tis made, my boy? Ah!"

I dragged Geoghegan away ten minutes later, and he led me to a teashop whose proprietors had caused it to be decorated after the fashion of what they fondly believed to be Japanese art and where the waitresses wore kimonos and obis. It was pretty full, but the Irishman was a tall fellow, and looking across the crowded room towards a far corner, he nodded at me.

"And didn't I tell you he'd be here, my boy?" he said. "And there he is, and I'll just make you known to each other, and then I'll away to the office and me duties, from which, to be sure, I have been absent an hour or so longer than I should have been, and sure, what matter? Me dear Dick, here is a gentleman that's an old and valued friend of mine, the child of me litt'ry bosom, that's aching to be inthrojuiced to you——"

I took a good look at Richard Steppe as the Irishman went through his ceremonies. I set him down as being not more than one-and-twenty. He was a well-built, well-made young fellow, of, I concluded, unusually strong physique; he looked like an athlete; good looking, too, and alert—no fool. He stared

curiously at me, as if wondering what on earth I wanted of him; it was not until Geoghegan had rolled away and I had ordered some tea at Steppe's table that I introduced my business.

"You are wondering why I asked Geoghegan to introduce me to you?" I said at last. "Of course. But I had a reason. So strong a reason that I'll ask you to treat all I may say as being absolutely secret, private, confidential—you understand?"

"Yes," he replied. "But now I am puzzled."

"No doubt," said I. "But not as much as you're going to be. Now listen—have you read about what's called the Rumbelow Point affair, during the last ten days?"

"Well, yes," he answered indifferently. "Not very carefully, though. One man mysteriously lost, and another man found shot—that it?"

"That's about it," I agreed. "Do you know Rumbelow Point?"

"I?" he exclaimed. "Good Lord, no! Don't even know where it is!"

"Very well," I continued. "Now I want to show you something. Look here."

Under cover of the table, at which we were sitting side by side, I produced and laid on the palm of my left hand the small memorandum book and the card —the card protruding from the pocket.

"There," I said.

Watching him narrowly, I saw an expression of intense amazement come into his face. He stared at the book and the card and then at me.

"Where on earth did you get those?" he demanded. "You?"

I put the book and card away quickly.

"That's what I'm here to tell you," I answered. "I found them—I, myself—close by the place where the man was murdered at Rumbelow Point, a few hours after the murder. The book—with your card in it—had evidently been dropped there—amongst the grass, in a narrow lane. But—who dropped it?"

He stared at me, almost incredulously, for some minutes; then he suddenly pointed to my cup.

"Drink your tea, Morrison," he said. "And then come out—this place is too crowded. I know a quiet spot—not far off—where we can be alone. Then I'll talk—and I guess there's some talking to be done, too!"

I followed him presently across Ludgate Circus to Ludgate Hill, where, descending some stairs from the street level he led me into an underground café and to a quiet corner in a smoking-room.

"Now," he said, as he filled and lighted his pipe, "just tell me again precisely how and when you found that book with my card in it. Then—as I know who you are—I'll tell you something. But tell me everything."

I told him the details. He asked no questions until I had finished.

"Does anyone know of this but you?" he inquired.

"Only one person, Steppe—a person of very high authority, between whom and myself it is an absolute secret, not to be divulged to anyone," I replied. "Take my word for that."

"Very good," he said. "Then I'll tell you. That's my card, of course, and I've seen that book before, and not so long ago. As a matter of fact, I saw my card slipped into the pocket of that book!"

"By the owner of the book?" I asked.

"Well, I reckon he was its owner," he said. "But here's the story. About a month ago, my attention was attracted to an advertisement in the personal column of *The Times*. I didn't cut it out, but I remember most of its wording. It was headed, simply, 'To Journalists,' and proceeded to state that the advertiser wanted the services of a smart, live, active, young newspaper man, willing to go anywhere and do anything; fond of adventure and not afraid of possible risk; tactful and discreet in dealing with other men and to be depended upon for secrecy. It added that a knowledge of French and German was necessary, and that some knowledge of financial journalism would be a recommendation. Well, it seemed to me that I was the right sort of man for that job, whatever it might be—I'm fond of adventure; I'm a pretty good plucked 'un, I believe; I can talk both

German and French all right, and as it happens, I do know a good deal about financial work—newspaper work. And, anyway, I was curious, so I replied to the advertisement—replies had to be sent to the care of an advertising agency."

"To any particular name?" I inquired.

"Well, no, that's just it—there was no name," replied Steppe. "There was a pseudonym—*Audax*. I replied, I say—but several days went by before I got any answer; indeed, I'd almost forgotten the matter when I got an answer. It seemed to me a very odd one. It merely said—it was a typewritten affair—that my letter had been received, and would I be in waiting outside the Café Mirandola, in Old Compton Street, at eight-thirty o'clock, the following evening? I say it was an odd letter—so it was, for there was no address, and no signature, and nothing to tell me how, supposing I did go to the Café Mirandola, I should recognize my correspondent, or how he would recognize me. However, being, as I said, fond of adventure, I kept the appointment. I found the Café Mirandola one of those places of which, as you know, there are no end in Soho—foreign-looking restaurant, of the cheapish order, a man in uniform at the door, shrubs in tubs on either side of him, and a general atmosphere of Continental cooking and tobacco about—you know. I took up a post on the pavement at precisely eight-thirty, and stared hard at every man who came along and at various others

who, like myself, seemed to be loafing around. Then, suddenly, I became aware of a man on the other side of the street who was inspecting me closely. So I inspected him, giving him as good as he gave, with the result that after a minute or two he crossed over and came towards me. The closer he got, the more closely I eyed him, for I was sure he was the chap I'd gone there to meet, and I wanted to know what sort of man it was I had to deal with."

"You can describe him, of course?" I suggested.

"Oh, well enough!" he assented. "He was obviously a foreigner, though of what particular brand I couldn't tell then, and I didn't decide afterwards—he was a bit of a puzzle in that way. But—a thickset chap, a little below medium height, dark hair and skin; I should say about forty-five years of age. Well dressed in a quiet way—but his clothes hadn't been made in England. Dark moustache, good teeth, rather full red lips—what some people would call rather a good-looking sort. Altogether decidedly foreign—but he spoke excellent English. He came up in a cool, collected way, asked me if I were Mr. Richard Steppe, and on my admitting that I was that person, made no offer to tell me his name, but quietly invited me into the restaurant behind us, where, in an alcove to which he immediately steered me, he at once ordered dinner for two. He gave me a jolly good dinner—I fancy they knew him there very well. And while he dined he asked me questions about my-

self and my attainments; examined me in German and in French; tested my financial knowledge, and all the rest of it. He seemed satisfied by the results, but I got precious little out of him. All he deigned to tell me was that a syndicate which he represented required the services of somebody like myself, who would be required to go as a sort of, what I should call special commissioner to some foreign country, from whence he would have to transmit reports in the form of letters to a financial journal—the name of which he didn't give me. Indeed, the whole interview—saving the dinner—was indefinite; I saw that he just wanted to have a look at me and to find out what sort I was, without deciding anything. Eventually he asked me for a card and the name of the paper on which I was working—I gave him the card you have just shown me, and I saw him, there and then, put it into a pocket of the memorandum book you found and now have; I noticed at the time that it was a brand new one. And that's all, Morrison—and now, how the devil comes that memorandum book to be picked up in that lane?"

"Before we go into that," said I, "let me ask you a question or two. Didn't you get this man's name?"

"No," he replied. "He gave me no name. He just said, at the end, that if he wanted to see me again he'd write or wire to me. Then, dinner and the interview being over, he dismissed me, and, as I left I saw him joined by another man, who had been

sitting at an adjacent table; he, too, was a foreigner."

"And that was the last you saw of him?" I suggested.

"Or heard," said Steppe. "I've neither seen nor heard of him since; indeed, I'd come to the conclusion that he and his syndicate had found some other man whom they considered more likely to suit them than I was."

"But you could recognize this man, of course?" I said.

"Oh, of course!" he exclaimed. "Know him amongst a thousand!"

"Very well," said I, "then you've just got to help me to find him! The fact is, Steppe, this Rumbelow Point mystery is a vastly more tangled one than the police have let out, and it's of the utmost importance that it should be solved as soon as possible."

CHAPTER VII

WHY ME?

Steppe met this last remark with a glance of shrewd inquiry.

"There's something behind all this, eh, Morrison?" he said. "Is that it?"

"A great deal behind it, Steppe!" I replied. "More than I'm able to tell you—at present. But, now that I've met you, and heard what you've got to say, I think I shall be able to take you into full confidence before long."

"That affair, then, down there at Rumbelow Point, is not just a mere common murder?" he suggested. "Remember—I've paid little attention to what has been printed about it."

"The situation's like this," said I. "That is, put into a nutshell. Mr. Peters, an elderly gentleman staying for a few days at the Starboard Light Inn, near Rumbelow Point, for the purpose of gratifying his taste for geology and fossil-collecting, was almost certainly—you might say certainly—carried off by unknown men who had some object in kidnapping him. Near the spot at which he was assailed was found the dead body of a fisherman, Mallett, who had evidently

gone to his rescue and was shot at close quarters. Nothing has been heard of Mr. Peters since."

"Any clue?" asked Steppe.

"There's your card and the memorandum book in which it was put carefully away," I said. "That's a secret, known only to myself and to one other person—a highly-placed person. The police don't know of it."

He gave me another shrewd glance at that.

"Oh—then your highly-placed person doesn't belong to the police?" he asked.

"No," said I; "he doesn't. But—he can control the police."

He nodded, and remained silent for a minute or two, evidently thinking.

"Well?" he said at last. "Any other clue?"

"There is a clue in the shape of a handful of red hair, found tightly grasped in the dead man's hand, as if he'd been shot while actually grappling with one of the kidnappers," said I. "That is in the hands of the police."

"Lots of carroty-haired men about!" he remarked. "Difficult, that. Still—but is there nothing else?"

"There is this," I said. "You tell me that the man you met in the Café Mirandola was a shortish, thick-set man. Now, I think he may have been—probably was—one of two men who were about Rumbelow Point the night before the outrage, and whom I myself, hidden at the time, saw, and heard, talking

some foreign language, in the woods. His face I couldn't see—but I saw his companion's——"

"What was he like?" interrupted Steppe.

"A taller man—obviously a foreigner," said I. "He struck a match while I watched them and I saw his face clearly—I could identify him without hesitation. Not the other, though—but it won't surprise me if that other is the man to whom you gave your card. How else could your card have got down there?"

He made no reply at that; instead, he plunged his hands in his trousers pockets, stretched out his legs, and dropping his chin towards his chest, appeared to relapse into profound thought. I let him think, for I could see that he was puzzling something out. At last he looked up at me with a quizzical glance.

"Of course," he said, "Mr. Peters is not Mr. Peters!"

"Well, I may tell you that much," I replied. "He isn't."

"Of course he isn't!" he retorted with a laugh. "And you needn't bother to keep up the profound-secret business any longer, Morrison! I know, now, who your Mr. Peters really is!"

I was somewhat taken aback by that bold declaration, and seeing that I was, he laughed again.

"Of course I know!" he went on. "I'd only to put two and two together, after hearing your story.

Peters is Petherwin—the Right Honourable Charles Petherwin, Chancellor of the Exchequer! Oh, well—I shan't give it away. But it's no use denying it, my son!"

"Exactly how do you deduce your conclusions, Steppe?" I asked. "I don't think anybody else has arrived at them!"

"Simple!" he answered. "By this time the Budget should be out—and it was pretty well known, Morrison, that there were to be some very remarkable and possibly fatal fiscal changes to be announced in it. What they were to be, however, could only be guessed at—it's well known, too, that Petherwin was keeping the thing profoundly secret. I know, however, having interested myself in finance, that foreign financiers—and some here, too—would have given their eyes to get an accurate forecast of them forty-eight or even twenty-four hours before their public announcement! But—the Budget isn't out—the Budget is postponed—indefinitely! Most unusual thing! And why is it postponed? Because Mr. Petherwin is indisposed. That's the official lie. The plain truth is—Mr. Petherwin has been very cleverly kidnapped and is being held captive while his captors carry out their little financial operations. That's it! And your highly-placed personage, Morrison, is, of course, the Prime Minister—though how you got in touch with him is more than I can explain."

"Well—you'll keep all this to yourself, Steppe?" said I. "It's not to be made into sensational copy for the *Planet!*"

"Then I'm right?" he asked, laughing. "Hit the nail, have I?"

"It seems useless to deny—officially or otherwise—that you have summed things up very accurately," I admitted. "And since you have, I'd better take you into my confidence still further." I went on to tell him all about my interview with Mr. Alstone, and of his commission to me. "Now," I concluded, "you'll come in with me, Steppe, in secrecy? It'll mean big things."

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"In the first place, find the man with whom you had that interview at the Café Mirandola," I replied. "It ought not to be difficult—probably he knocks about these foreign cafés in Soho."

"I can try that, certainly," he said. "And I suppose that if I find him, it'll be a case of tracking and tracing, eh? Well—where can I find you, Morrison, in town, when I want you?"

I had already foreseen that my work in connection with this affair would lie in London, at present at any rate, and I gave Steppe the address of a quiet hotel in Bloomsbury at which he could find me from noon of the next day. Presently, with pledges of secrecy and of concerted action, we parted, and wishing to get some necessaries of clothing for my stay in

town, I caught a south-bound express for Wickhampton.

It was nearly dark when I reached my cottage. I had only been away a few hours from it, but I had learned so much during that time that the few hours seemed like several days, and the familiar surroundings in the cottage strange and odd. Probably because I had spent an unusually exciting and busy time in London, the silence and loneliness down there in the woods felt anything but welcome that evening, and I had half a mind to pack up what things I wanted and go to the Starboard Light to sleep. But I had put that off as being a weak and foolish suggestion, and having lighted my lamp I began to make my preparations for an early setting-out the next morning.

I finished my packing at ten o'clock, and that I might have a glass of whisky before going to bed, opened my front door just afterwards and set out with a jug for my well, at the bottom of the garden. But I never reached the well and never got any water and never had any whisky—my own, at any rate—that night. I had not gone half a dozen yards from the porch when some miscreant, hidden amongst the shrubs on the opposite side of the garden, fired at me—once, twice—I distinctly heard the bullets scream near my head.

Before a third shot could follow—though it came—I had plunged through the hedge at my right hand

and was hurling myself into the undergrowth beyond. None of the three shots as much as grazed me, but the first two were so unpleasantly close that they made me rush off in a panic of—perhaps not fear, but of desire for self-preservation. Anyway, I forced my way through the wood, particularly thick thereabouts, without much care as to where I was going, so long as I put a safe distance between myself and my would-be murderers. I went headlong through whatever came in the way, and I emerged on the other side of the wood torn, scratched, bleeding—and still grasping the water jug.

There was a light burning in the window of a house whose high gables and chimneys stood out against the sky across the field on the edge of which I stood, and I made for it, there and then, remembering that a sturdy old farmer, one Minchin, lived there. Minchin, a big, bearded man, opened his door himself when I knocked at it; he had a good lamp in his front hall, and I dare say I looked a very pretty object when its light fell on me—my grey tweed suit torn to ribbons, splashes of blood all over it, scratches all down my cheeks, and in my right hand, intact, the jug.

"Lord ha' marcy!" said Minchin. "Mr. Morrison?"

I walked in as he threw the door wide, and set down the jug on the hall table.

"Mr. Minchin," said I, "sorry to disturb you, but

the fact is, I've been shot at! Three times—and at close range."

"Hit?" he asked anxiously.

"No—this is from getting scratched in the wood. You see," I went on, the reaction tending to make me loquacious, "I was going to have a glass of whisky before going to bed, and I went out to get water at the well, and I was shot at almost as soon as I'd crossed the threshold——"

He threw open the door of his parlour and motioning me inside, mixed me a drink from a decanter on the table and bade me get it down before I said a word more. As I drank—more greedily than I could have believed possible, and not from thirst, either—he eyed me over again and shook his head.

"This'll be all of a piece with that other affair, Mr. Morrison," he said. "Same lot that shot Mallett."

"Why should they want to shoot me?" said I.

He shook his head again—knowingly.

"You know something," he replied. "That's it! You were to be got rid of! Well—well—and you're sure they didn't hit you, slight, now?"

I reassured him on that point, and presently he called his wife, and between them they made me presentable, after which Minchin and I sat down and discussed matters. I had no doubt he was right in his conclusion—I knew something. But—what was it that I knew that seemed so dangerous a piece of knowledge? I could think of but one thing—that I

had let it be known that I could positively identify the man whom I had seen in the wood.

Minchin gave me a bed. When I rose from it in the morning, he and I walked across the wood to my cottage. The only reason I had for going there was to get my bag, which I had left, already packed, on the table in the front parlour. I showed Minchin, as we passed through the garden, exactly where I had been passing along when the shots were fired, and where the man who fired them must have been hidden in the shrubbery on the side opposite the wood. Then we went into the cottage. The lamp was still alight, smouldering and smelling vilely, and my bag had been forced open and its carefully arranged contents lay strewn about the room—thrown anywhere, anyhow, mingled with a mass of papers pulled out of my bureau, every drawer of which stood open. Evidently, having missed me and concluded that I should not return, the miscreants had raided my cottage in search of—what?

Minchin was a man of some power of ideas. He started the theory that these people, whoever they were, had shot at me to frighten me away, so that they could get inside the cottage and search at their leisure. I scarcely saw that—I still treasured a keen recollection of the relief I had felt when I was well clear of those whistling bullets, which, I felt sure, were meant to kill.

"Besides, Minchin," said I, "they'd know that if

they merely frightened me into running away, I should go for the police and swoop down on them while they were in the cottage. Don't you see?"

"No!" he answered, shaking his head. "They'd know that you couldn't get the police as quick as all that. The nearest policeman is two miles off, and he's only one man. To get more police help you'd have had to go to Wickhampton."

"That argues that whoever they were, they knew this district," said I.

"Just so, Mr. Morrison," he said dryly. "I should say they do. And seeing what I see here, my opinion is that this is what they were after—to find something amongst your things. Nice mess they've made, too, sir."

He helped me to put things a bit straight, and having packed my bag again, I locked up the cottage, and went back with him to breakfast. During the morning he and I made such inquiries as we could as to the presence of strangers in the district the previous evening—in particular we interviewed a gamekeeper and his watchers. They had not seen anybody about; we learned nothing.

At noon, one of Minchin's farm lads carrying my bag to the nearest railway, I set off for town again. There was a uniformed policeman on the platform of the little station from which I had to travel by a branch to the main line at Wickhampton; as I got nearer to him, I recognized the man who had given

me a mild lecture on my enormity of conduct in talking to the newspaper men. He recognized me, too, and grinned knowingly as he touched his cap.

"Good-morning, sir!" he said. "A fine morning!" Then, giving me a meaning glance, he drew a little nearer. "Going on in this train, sir? So am I—and I should be glad of a word with you."

CHAPTER VIII

GOSSIP AND THEORY

I could see quite well that this man wanted to find out if I could tell him anything, and I became on my guard; I had no mind to assist the local police, or, indeed, any police at that moment. And when the train came in, and he ushered me into an empty compartment, I let him do the talking.

"I suppose you haven't learned anything new about the affair—or, as I should say, affairs—down yonder at Rumbelow Point, Mr. Morrison?" he began. "No—well, I thought perhaps, that you living close by, might have heard something. Puzzling affair, sir, isn't it?"

"Is it puzzling your people?" I asked.

"Beyond measure!" he exclaimed, throwing up his hands. "All of us! Can't make head or tail of it!"

"What particularly puzzles you?" I inquired.

"All of it!" he said, with emphasis on the first word. "All, sir! But one thing above everything. Now, we're going on the theory that this Mr. Peters was carried away by the men who attacked him. They only could carry him away in broad daylight by one means—a car, probably, a closed car. Such a

car could only have travelled on the mainroad that runs from Strillion Cove to the mainland—there is no other way. The narrow lane in which there were signs of a struggle—you know it, Mr. Morrison?"

"I know it," said I, "and I saw the traces you refer to."

"Well, that runs into the mainroad," he continued. "Now, we examined the surface of the mainroad, at the point where the lane joins it, most carefully, within an hour of the discovery of Mallett's body in the adjoining wood. The soil there is sandy. There wasn't a trace of any car on it, and we couldn't find one anywhere farther on, in either direction. Then we made close investigation all along that road —we couldn't hear of any car having been seen on it during the whole of that day. Indeed, a man that I know well enough, a thoroughly dependable man, who was working on the road from first thing in the morning until six o'clock in the evening, declares positively that no car even went up or down during that time. How, then, did these people carry off Mr. Peters?"

"The sea is within two or three hundred yards of that lane," I remarked. "What about that?"

"Yes, we thought of that," he answered. "And the beach was carefully examined. We found nothing down there. To be sure, the tide had been up twice between the probable time of the kidnapping and our search, and it would have smoothed away all

trace of a boat having been pulled up on the sands. But there were men fishing in the cove that morning —I mean the morning of the disappearance and the murder—and they never saw anything unusual. Mystery, I call it."

"It is undoubtedly a mystery," I assented.

"And there's another thing," he continued, "and to my mind it's just as much of a mystery as what I've been talking about. This, Mr. Morrison—there's no doubt that the men who attacked Mr. Peters had been lying in wait for him. Hiding, in fact, somewhere about. But—where? We can't hear anything of them. We've talked to and questioned, I should think, every man, woman, and child in the neighbourhood on that point, and we're no better for our labours. Nobody saw or heard anything of these men —unless you did?"

"I certainly saw two men in the wood between Rumbelow Point and my cottage the night before the outrage," said I. "But I don't know that they were the men who attacked Mr. Peters."

"Just so—though I think they were," he said. "The point is—where were they sheltering? They must have had a—a——"

"A base," said I. "Precisely—and it must have been near at hand. And—you can't find anything?"

"Nothing!" he answered. "They might have come down from the clouds!"

He made a grimace expressive of disgust, and re-

lapsed into silence. But finding that I, too, was silent, he soon found his tongue again.

"There's another thing that puzzled me, Mr. Morrison," he went on. "And that's the very slight amount of interest that's being taken in this case by the London authorities. It's curious, to say the least of it. I suppose this Mr. Peters was a gentleman of position, by all accounts—moneyed man, and kept a valet, and all that. Well, he might have been a roadside tramp for all the interest that's being shown in his disappearance by Scotland Yard! We've had no help from that quarter—not even an inquiry. Just left to us—that's about it."

"And the Mallett case, too?" I asked. "Is that exciting no interest?"

"Why, the two cases are as one, aren't they, Mr. Morrison?" he replied. "Mallett wouldn't have lost his life if he hadn't gone to Mr. Peters' help. No—there's no interest in that, either."

"I take it you're about at a standstill, then?" said I.

"Something very like it," said he. "We're no farther towards a solution than we were a week ago! Clues? No, we've no clues, beyond that bit of carroty hair found in Mallett's fingers, and the fact that you saw two strange men, foreigners, in that wood and can recognize one of them—if you see him again. Which," he added lugubriously, "I don't believe you ever will."

"You anticipate failure, eh?" said I. "You don't think——"

"I'll tell you what I think, Mr. Morrison," he interrupted. "I think it was a damned clever business on the part of whoever carried it through. I don't know who or what this Mr. Peters may be, nor why anybody should want to kidnap him, though I've a pretty good idea that it's something to do with money, but of one thing I am certain, and that is that the whole thing was carefully contrived and had been planned with attention to all possible details. That's my opinion. The work of an extraordinarily clever gang, Mr. Morrison—that's about it."

"Well, however clever they were, they made one big blunder when they shot poor Mallett!" I remarked. "But I suppose that was done on the spur of the moment, by one of them who lost his head."

"Do you think so?" he answered. "I don't. Mallett disturbed everything—Mallett could have given the alarm before they got clear away—no, I think they shot Mallett in cold blood! They'd just got to rid themselves of him—for good."

"Then in that case I hope you'll catch every one of them and that they'll all be hanged!" said I. "For that's deliberate murder of an inoffensive man."

"And that's just what I believe it to have been," he said. "But, catch them—I wish I saw more chance of it!"

The local train was just then pulling into Wick-

hampton Station and saying good-day to my companion I went off to the main platform to get the London express. I had some little time to wait for it, and began strolling up and down. And suddenly, seated in an alcove, a pile of luggage ranged about him, and looking more smugly respectable than ever, I saw Lassiter.

Lassiter saw me in the same moment, and he rose to his feet, lifting his hat respectfully—respectfully, too, he waited to be spoken to.

"Good-morning, Lassiter," said I. "I had no idea that you were still in the district."

"I came down yesterday, sir," he replied in undoubtedly melancholy accents. "It was thought best that I should remove my master's belongings from Mr. Withers' hotel, sir. They had remained there, sir, since—since Mr. Peters disappeared, sir."

He made a motion of his hand towards the suitcases and things at his feet, and I glanced at them as one might glance at the properties of a dead man. Lassiter followed my glance, and his face became still more melancholy.

"I suppose you've no more news, Lassiter?" I asked.

"None, sir," he replied. "Nor, I believe, has Mr. Rutherford any. I observed, sir, just now that you left the local train in company with one of the Wickhampton police—an inspector, I think, sir. May I venture to inquire, sir, if you have news?"

"I haven't, Lassiter," I answered. "And he hasn't, either. We have just been talking matters over. The local police are puzzled."

"Yes, sir," he said meekly. "I am not astonished, sir. But in my opinion, sir, that is only to be expected. The police, sir, are too much given to what I may call conventional procedure. They are also what I consider obstinate in their mental processes, sir."

"Do you see instances in this case, Lassiter?" I inquired.

"Frankly, sir, and if I may voice my own opinions, I do," he said. "From the very beginning, sir, the police have taken it for granted that my master was attacked by some evilly disposed men and carried away—kidnapped, in fact. That, sir, is the police theory—a hard and fast one!"

I looked at him with some astonishment.

"Why, Lassiter!" I exclaimed, "isn't it yours?"

He shook his head solemnly—the gesture was all the more solemn because his serious face was crowned by a severely respectable tophat.

"No, sir!" he replied with emphasis. "It never has been, sir. My theory, sir, if I may make bold to express it, is that my master was never attacked by anyone, but that he wandered away in a state of—mental aberration, I believe the doctors call it, sir. Loss of memory, sir—in plainer language."

I was so genuinely surprised at his advancement of

this notion, which, until then, had never occurred to me, that I made no immediate reply. And Lassiter spoke again, quietly, giving me a significant glance.

"Yes, sir—loss of memory," he repeated. "Overwork, sir."

"Dear me!" I said. "I wonder if that is so. What is Mr. Peters' work, now?"

"That, sir, I am not at liberty to say," replied Lassiter. "But I may say, sir, that it is exacting—continuously and extremely exacting. It is not for me to presume, sir, but I have often wondered how long my master's brain would stand it. I—I have feared for him, sir."

"Well, that's quite a new view of things," I said. "But—Mallett? What about the murder of Mallett?"

"In my opinion, sir, if you will excuse me for offering it, I do not think that the murder of Mallett had anything whatever to do with the disappearance of my master. Except that both events are highly to be deplored, sir, and that both occurred about the same time, I do not think there is any connection between them. How Mallett came by his death, sir, I am, of course, unable to explain. As regards my master, I think that what I had feared came upon him when he went out of the Starboard Light Inn that morning and that he then and there wandered away."

"Surely he'd have been heard of by now," I said.

"I do not know that he would, sir," he replied. "He may have gone away by train, sir, to some distance—to quite a different part of the country, sir. Mr. Peters, sir, is not an unusual type of gentleman, in appearance—if I may say so without offence, sir, he is of a very common type of elderly gentleman—there is nothing remarkable in his air or manner or features, sir. A quite ordinary gentleman I would call him, sir."

"But—money?" I said. "He couldn't go far or stay away long without money. And few people carry much ready money in their pockets, you know."

He shook his head at that, smiling a little.

"Mr. Peters, sir," he answered, "is an exception. The truth is, sir, he always carries a good deal of money about him—I have felt it my duty, as his confidential servant, to remonstrate with him on that point, but without effect. It is a habit, sir—he has always done it; you never know, he says, when sudden need may arise. Mr. Peters, sir, would have a sum of money about him that would be sufficient to last him for quite a considerable period of time, sir."

"Perhaps somebody attacked him for that?" said I. "His habit may have been known."

"No, sir, I think not," replied Lassiter. "I think, sir, my theory will be found to be correct. A sudden attack of mental aberration, sir. Excuse me, sir—the London train is arriving."

Lifting his hat to me with his usual quaint polite-

ness, he turned away to attend to his pile of luggage, and bidding him good-bye I went off to the London train. All the way up to London I wracked my brains over what I had just heard. Strangely enough, it had never occurred to me—nor, for that matter, to anyone who had spoken to me on the subject—that Mr. Peters, otherwise the Right Honourable Charles Petherwin, might be suffering from loss of memory, and, as a result, have wandered clean away. But I saw that there might be something in it—perhaps a good deal. Lassiter, of course, knew who and what his master really was, and the continuous and exacting work he spoke of was Mr. Petherwin's work in connection with the financial affairs of the nation. Altogether I was a bit staggered, and the kidnapping theory began to look as if it might be a false one. And yet I had to consider certain hard facts. First, the presence of the two strange men in the wood on the night before Mr. Peters' disappearance. Second, the discovery of Steppe's card in the lane near the place at which there had obviously been a struggle. Third, the murder of Mallett and the evidence that he had been grappling with a man from whose head he had torn a tuft of hair. Fourth, my own adventure of the previous evening—shot at in my own garden by somebody who, whether he meant to kill me or frighten me, took jolly good care when I ran away to ransack my belongings. It was all very puzzling, and before I reached London an-

other possibility came into my mind—supposing Mr. Peters had shared the fate of Mallett and that his body, robbed of his precious memoranda and papers, was even now lying buried in some unsearched corner of those woods or of the adjacent shore.

That was possible. And it seemed to me that there were now three possibilities. The Chancellor of the Exchequer might be (1) wandering, suffering from loss of memory; (2) imprisoned somewhere, at the mercy of unscrupulous captors; or (3) dead—and buried.

CHAPTER IX

THE CONVENTIONAL LIE

I was still thinking things over and wondering about my next course of action when Steppe called on me that night at the quiet hotel in Bloomsbury whereat I had taken up my quarters. I saw at once that Steppe had some news, and I took him where he could communicate it in strict privacy. But before he told me anything I told him of my own adventure on the previous evening.

"What do you make of that, Steppe?" I asked when I had made an end. "Nice sort of experience, eh?"

Steppe was rolling a cigarette between his fingers, and he completed his job and lighted the result before replying.

"Seems to me that either of two reasons supply a motive for that, Morrison," he said at last. "First —the man who shot at you wanted to rid himself and his associates of a highly dangerous witness; you've let it be known, publicly, you see, through the papers that you could positively identify the taller of the two men you saw in the wood, and as long as you're alive, there's always—to this gang—the danger of

your doing so. Second—these people may believe you to be in possession of a link, and, either by shooting you dead, or frightening you away from your cottage, they wanted to secure possession of it."

"What link am I in possession of?" I said.

Steppe gave me a significant look—which, I fancied, had in it something of pity, for my obtuseness.

"My card!" he answered. "My card, Morrison. That's all! But—quite sufficient to hang a man—granted certain supplementary evidence."

"How should these people—whoever they are—know that I found your card?" I replied. "No one knows that I found it—except Mr. Alstone and yourself."

"Well, I certainly haven't given away that bit of information," he said coolly, "and I don't suppose the Prime Minister has—unless, indeed, he's given it, all unsuspecting to some traitor. But I think the knowledge of this gang that you have the card was the real reason of your being shot at. Possibly it's not sheer, positive knowledge—it may be only supposition on their part. From what you told me last evening of the relation—geographical relation—of your cottage to the scene of the kidnapping of Peters and murder of Mallett, I should say that these fellows concluded that if anybody thereabouts picked up that memorandum book and card it was—you!"

"That argues that, whoever they are, these fellows are very well acquainted with the neighbourhood,"

I remarked, after a pause. "They must know it well."

"I make no doubt they do, Morrison," he said. "Oh yes, I think you may reckon on that. Especially after learning what I have since I saw you."

"Oh, you have learnt something, have you?" I exclaimed. "What, now?"

Before replying he made himself another cigarette, and when he spoke it was with a cautious glance all round the smoking-room in a far corner of which we were sitting, with no one near us.

"You know that Rumbelow Point district pretty well, Morrison?" he began.

"Very well indeed," said I. "Been all over it, one time or another, on foot."

"Do you know anything"—he dropped his voice to a whisper—"of a man named Sherman who lives in those parts?"

In spite of myself I gave a sudden start, staring at Steppe with a sense of coming surprise strong about me.

"Of course I do!" I replied. "He has a queer old house in a valley, a little inland from Strillion Cove. Sort of week-end house—he's a Member of Parliament."

"That is the man," assented Steppe. "M. P. for some North Country industrial constituency. He's also a company promoter; mixed up in various finan-

cial operations, and—what's more to the purpose—he's proprietor and nominal editor of the *Financial Monitor*. And—between you and me and the post, as they say—he hasn't an overgood reputation."

I remained silent, staring at him. And I was thinking—about the man he was talking of. Of course I knew Sherman; everybody in the Rumbelow Point district knew him, though, to be sure, he was very little seen there. A bachelor, and keeping but a small staff of servants at the house I had just referred to, he only came down for a few days at a time and usually spent his leisure in fishing or in a small yacht which he sailed about the surrounding creeks and bays. I had met him once or twice, and had regarded him as a quiet, somewhat taciturn man, who, when in our neighbourhood, kept himself very much to himself.

"You're wanting to know what this has to do with the Peters business—as we'll call it," continued Steppe, after a minute or two. "I'll tell you. Last night, by sheer accident, I saw the man to whom I gave the card which you found in the memorandum book. Sheer accident—yet it wasn't at all strange that I did, considering facts. I was in Fleet Street, rather late, when I saw this man on the opposite side, hurrying along. So I just turned on my heel and followed him cautiously. He turned into Wine Office Court and into the editorial office of the *Financial Monitor*. Now, that office is on the ground floor,

and its front room, at any rate, is destitute of window covering, and when I took a stroll past and peeped in, I saw this man writing away at a table—from the speed with which he was throwing off slips of copy, I guess he was doing an article for the paper then getting ready for issue; the *Financial Monitor* is published Thursdays, and that, of course, was Wednesday. Well, that was enough for me—I knew that this man could be found at that office, probably any time, so I just left it at that and went home. But this morning I looked up particulars and information about the *Financial Monitor,* and I found that its sole proprietor was this Mr. Robert Sherman, who is also nominal editor. Not much in that, perhaps, for your purpose—but it made me jump when I saw that Mr. Sherman not only has one address at Queen Anne's Mansions, but also resides at Brockensdene Grange, near Rumbelow Point, in Wessex. Eh?''

We were both silent for a while, busied with our own thoughts.

''What do you make of it, Steppe?'' I asked after a time.

''Don't know—exactly,'' he answered. ''Queer business, I think. The man I followed last night is undoubtedly the man I met at the Café Mirandola, and to whom I gave my card and in whose brand new memorandum book I saw the card placed. You picked up book and card near the scene of Mallett's murder—and, we presume, of Peters' kidnapping.

And close by—so I understand—is this Brockensdene Grange whereat resides Sherman, presumably employer of the man just spoken of."

"Yes," I said. "Yes. Queer indeed. And—suspicious!"

"How far is this place of Sherman's from the lane in which you found the book and card?" he asked. "Within easy distance?"

"Three-quarters of a mile," I replied promptly. "It's an old house—in not over-good repair, I should say—standing in a valley that runs inland from the coast. Between it and the lane where I found the memorandum book there are thick woods—there's a great deal of wood about there."

"Well—there are the facts," remarked Steppe. He threw away his cigarette, stretched his arms, and looked at me. "What do you think, now, Morrison?"

"You said something about Sherman's reputation?" I suggested.

"Made some guarded and confidential inquiries during the day," he replied. "A bit fishy in his financial dealings—in the past, anyhow. Not been without scandal, and that sort of thing, in money matters, I mean. Generally speaking—from what I was able to pick up—an adventurer."

"And yet—a Member of Parliament!" I exclaimed.

"No great cop in that, is there, nowadays?" observed Steppe. "Bit off, isn't it? Well, what's to be done?"

That was a question easily put, but not so easily answered. Before I could make any reply to it, Steppe put another.

"Look here—you know that district. What sort of place is this Brockensdene Grange? And in what sort of surroundings? What I'm driving at is this—is it the sort of place in which a man could be kept prisoner without the people round about knowing it? A lonely place?"

"It's all that," said I. "I should say you could keep a man prisoner there for as long as you liked—granted complicity on the part of your household."

"Oh, that's easily managed!" he answered. "Well, now, supposing, for some purpose of their own, these chaps we've been talking of waylaid and collared Peters and took him off there to this old house? He may be there now."

"Object?" I asked.

"We pretty well know that already. They wanted the secret of his Budget—particulars. By this time, no doubt, they've carried out some financial operations as a result of what they've learnt. Morrison—we ought to go down and have a look at that place!"

That was precisely what I was thinking myself, and I said so.

"Is there any spot close by—not your cottage—that we could use as a base?" asked Steppe. "It'll have to be a spy business—secret."

"Yes, there's a farmhouse at which I took refuge

last night," I answered. "Minchin's. Minchin is a good sort—a dependable man, who'd be uncommonly useful in an affair of this sort. But if this affair *is* of this sort—if it's as you seem to suspect, that these men have got Peters in their power at Brockensdene Grange, it'll be a highly dangerous business, interfering with them. From my experience of last night, they wouldn't hesitate at shooting."

"I don't know that we would interfere," said Steppe. "My notion is—investigation. Give us the lie of the place—how does it stand in relation to the other places round about?"

"It's an uncommonly lonely place," I told him. "It stands on a plateau in a narrow valley, with deep woods all round, except on one side, where the grounds run down to a narrow stream."

"Plenty of cover about it, eh?" he suggested.

"No end—on three sides. I've been close to it—in the woods—often, and I've never seen anybody about; I don't think Sherman keeps up anything of an establishment there. But," I went on, "don't you forget, Steppe, that if he's had a hand in this affair and got an important personage like the Chancellor locked up in his old house, he'll have the whole spot guarded—somehow."

"Forget nothing!" he replied. "Thought of all that. Our job is first to take a squint at the spot—generally. If we see anything at all suspicious, then we can develop our plans. And as to danger, I've

got a pair of first-rate automatic pistols, my boy—got 'em a bargain from a man who'd been out where he thought they might be of use. They weren't, and as he settled down when he came back, he sold 'em to me—cheap. We'll take them—it's a comfortable feeling to have something of that sort handy in circumstances which may be unpleasant. I only say—may be."

"There's only one thing I'm undecided about," I said. "Ought I to let the high and mighty personage to whom I'm responsible know what we propose—before setting out?"

"I think not, Morrison," replied Steppe gravely. "This is our job. Tell him if and when we've something definite to tell. Now, let's fix how we can get down to this place quietly and secretly. This is Thursday—from what you say, Sherman makes Brockensdene Grange a sort of week-end resort. Can we get down to this farmer chap you spoke of tomorrow night, and during the week-end do our looking round Sherman's retreat?"

"Nothing easier," said I, and explained to him precisely how we could go, and how reach Minchin's farmstead by a route across country in which we should be likely to escape all observation. And having settled to meet at Waterloo on the following evening at seven o'clock, to catch a train that left ten minutes later, we parted, and I went to bed—sorely puzzled as to the practical value of our enter-

prise. It was certainly a highly suspicious circumstance that I should have picked up close to the scene of the struggle in which Mallet had lost his life and Peters had been carried off a card given by Steppe to a man of more or less mystery who turned out to have some connection with Sherman, tenant of Brockensdene Grange, a house closely approximate to that scene. What other conclusion could one come to than that this man—who, from Steppe's general description of him, I felt sure to be the shorter of the two men I had met in the wood—had dropped the memorandum book in that lane while taking part in the attack on Peters? How, otherwise, had it, or could it, have come there? But that conclusion led to another —if this man was one of a gang, Sherman another, the man I could identify a third, and if they had used or were using Brockensdene Grange as a base for their operations, then their precautions as regards secrecy and safety would no doubt be of a highly elaborate nature, and I saw little chance of success for Steppe and myself. And however Steppe might minimize it, there was a considerable element of personal danger in our adventure, and I had no mind to hear bullets whistling past my ears again.

However, we were in for it, and next evening I met Steppe at the appointed time and place, and we set out for a certain wayside station from which I intended to take an unfrequented route to Minchin's farm. The train was somewhat crowded and our

smoking compartment being full, we had no opportunity of exchanging private conversation. But soon after we were off Steppe handed me a copy of an evening paper, indicating a paragraph by digging his thumb-nail into the margin.

"In the *House of Commons* this afternoon, the *Prime Minister,* replying to Mr. Kynaston, said that the *Chancellor of the Exchequer* had not yet fully recovered from his indisposition and the introduction of the Budget must be indefinitely postponed. He added that the right honourable gentleman was now recuperating in the country, and it was hoped that he would be back in his place before long."

"Nothing so useful as the conventional lie, Morrison," whispered Steppe as I returned the paper to him. "And in this instance it's particularly useful —to everybody concerned."

CHAPTER X

AN ASTONISHING ADVERTISEMENT

It was late in the evening and long after dark when Steppe and I knocked at the door of Minchin's farmhouse. I had no doubt of a welcome there, and we got it at once; Minchin was quick to enter into the spirit of the thing and swift-witted enough to know what we were after. He took us into his parlour and set refreshments before us, and as soon as his wife had bustled out of the room to prepare her best chamber for our reception, he gave me a look which had something of the slyly mysterious in it.

"Got a bit of news for you, Mr. Morrison," he said, going over to a side-table and taking up a folded newspaper which lay on top of an ancient tea-caddy. "I should have sent it to you by to-morrow's post if I'd known your address in London. But there you are—you can read it for yourself. You see what this is?" he continued, spreading out the paper on the table by which Steppe and I were sitting. "This week's *Wickhampton Gazette*. And—there's what I mean."

He pointed to an advertisement, prominently displayed on the first page, and headed:

"Five Pounds Reward

"*Lost,* some days ago, in the neighbourhood of Brockensdene Woods, Strillion Cove, and Rumbelow Point, a leather-bound Memorandum Book, new and unused, containing in back pocket, a visiting card. The above reward will be paid to anyone bringing the same to Robert Sherman, Esq., M.P., Brockensdene Grange, or forward it to him at 28c, Queen Anne's Mansions, London, S.W."

Steppe and I refrained from audible comment and even from an exchange of glances; we had no mind to let Minchin know, at that stage, anyway, that the missing property was in my pocket.

"Deal of queer things happening about here just now," observed Minchin, with a chuckle. "Five pounds seems a lot of money to pay for finding a bit of a memorandum book—with nothing in it. Think it's anything to do with all the rest of it, gentlemen?"

"Can't say, Minchin," I answered. "It certainly looks queer. Perhaps there's some particular value attached to the book. Mr. Sherman, eh?—you know him, don't you, Minchin?"

"Why, I know him in this way, Mr. Morrison—that we supply him with milk, eggs, and butter," replied Minchin. "I've spoken to him now and again—he's not much there at Brockensdene Grange, except on Sundays. Comes down there for the week-end, like—and brings a friend or two with him, sometimes."

"How many servants does he keep there?" inquired Steppe. "Big establishment?"

"No, sir. Man and his wife—elderly couple," answered Minchin. "Man does the rough work and a bit of gardening—the wife sees to the cooking. Light job—as I say, Mr. Sherman's only there at times. There are times when he doesn't come near the place for weeks together. Not much of a place to come to, either," he continued, with a sniff. "Not what I call a gentleman's house, at all, nowadays, though it used to be, once upon a time."

"Why, what's the matter with it?" asked Steppe.

"Want's doing up, sir—if it hasn't got past it," said Minchin. "It's a big, rambling place, and one part of it, if it isn't ruinous already, soon will be. You see, it had been empty, unlet, for a good many years when this Mr. Sherman took it, and when he did take it, he did nothing to put it right—spent nothing on it. He only uses one wing; all the rest's left to dust and dirt, I should say, by the looks of it."

"Do you know when Mr. Sherman had any company there last, Minchin?" I inquired.

"I couldn't say, for certain, Mr. Morrison," he answered. "We generally know by the housekeeper wanting more supplies—I fancy there were visitors there not so long ago. They're always gentlemen, you know—he's a bachelor, is Mr. Sherman."

"Do you never see anything of him and his visitors?" asked Steppe.

"Very seldom, sir," said Minchin. "It's what I call a shut-in place, that—thick woods all around it, except on one side. You see, I never go up there, as a rule—we have a lad who takes the milk and stuff round."

We shifted the talk to some other subject then, and did not revive it until we were alone in the big best bedroom to which Mrs. Minchin had consigned us. Then Steppe approached it eagerly.

"I say, Morrison, this is a damned queer thing!" he whispered as he sat down on one of the two old-fashioned beds which filled opposite corners of the room. "What's it mean? Is it bluff?"

"Why—bluff?" I asked.

"Well—we're going on the supposition that whoever dropped that memorandum book in the lane where you found it had something to do with the Peters-Mallett affair, aren't we?" he replied. "Now, the man—if that supposition is correct—who did so drop it would be something worse than a fool if by advertising for its recovery he drew attention to himself. Unless, out of sheer bravado, he thinks by this apparent openness to show that he's nothing to do with the outrage and the murder, eh?"

"Hanged if I can make it out," said I. "I think we're going on supposition a lot too much. And if we're going to suppose things, I can do a lot of supposing. Suppose the loss of the memorandum book has nothing to do with the murder of Mallett and

the kidnapping of Peters? Suppose Peters never was kidnapped? Suppose Mallett's murder has no connection at all with whatever happened to Peters? Suppose the presence of those two men I saw in the wood was of an entirely accidental and innocent nature? Suppose every theory that's been advanced so far is all wrong, and that we're absolutely on the wrong track, and——"

"I dare say we are," he broke in. "That's extremely likely, old son! But I'll tell you what isn't supposition—the facts that Mallett was found with a bullet through him, and that Peters, otherwise Petherwin, Chancellor of the Exchequer, has never been seen or heard of since he passed your cottage that morning. Come—what do you say to that?"

There was nothing to say—so I said something else.

"What are we to do about this advertisement?" I asked.

"That's plain work," he answered. "To-morrow, Saturday, we take a stroll through the woods to Brockensdene Grange—which, from friend Minchin's account of it, is just the sort of place at which adventures might befall one—and, if Mr. Robert Sherman is at home, we ask to see him. You inform him that you have found the book; you tell him, too, that the humble individual with you is the person referred to on the card inside the book. And then—we just wait to hear what the gentleman has got to say about it. See?"

We debated the possibilities of Sherman's advertisement pretty thoroughly before we went to sleep that night, and again next morning, without arriving at any definite conclusion. I think we were both on our guard when we went off to Brockensdene Grange —and when we emerged from the thick woods and came in front of it, we paused by common instinct and looked at it and at each other with a mutual questioning.

"Queer old spot, Morrison," murmured Steppe. "More ancient and tumbledown than I'd thought for. Sort of place in which you'd expect to find an enchanted princess, carried off by ogres, eh?"

"I dare say we shall find Sherman material enough," said I. "That is, if we find him at all. He mayn't be here."

Sherman, however, was there—so said a sour-faced, elderly woman who answered our knock; the housekeeper, no doubt, of whom Minchin had told us. She glanced us over with suspicion and disfavour.

"I'm not allowed to take anybody in to Mr. Sherman unless he knows their business first," she answered, shaking her head at my request for an interview with her master. "What might you be wanting with him?"

We had brought Minchin's copy of the *Wickhampton Gazette* with us, and I shoved it into her skinny hand.

"Tell Mr. Sherman I have called to see him about

that advertisement," said I. "And mention my name, Mr. Morrison, of Cove Cottage."

She went off, leaving us at the open door, and going down a long, stone-paved hall disappeared round a corner at its farther end. But she had scarcely disappeared when she reappeared, beckoning us to go to her. We went, noting on our way the gaunt, comfortless character of the place. The hall itself was destitute of floor covering; the stone pavement was uneven and cold to one's tread; the stone walls on either side were destitute of adornment, save for a few old pikes and muskets fastened here and there by stanchions. It was all just about as comfortless as a prison or a public institution, and deadly silent; the woman had evidently caught its spirit, for it was by no more than a silent gesture that she indicated a heavy door immediately in front of us before betaking herself elsewhere. This door was slightly ajar; I gave a preliminary tap on its panels and we walked in.

Here, once inside that door, was a difference. We found ourselves in a big, handsomely furnished room, on the farther side of which was a wide window overlooking the coast and the sea. The walls were lined with books in fine bindings; there were pictures on all the vacant spaces. In the middle stood a big, business-like desk, littered with books and papers, and in its centre, facing us as we entered, sat Sherman, who was busily writing. He didn't trouble to

look up when we entered; and when he did, it was only to give us a careless glance, a nod, and a wave of his hand towards a couple of chairs near the desk. Then he went on writing—and I took this opportunity of having a good, close look at him, though I had seen him before. A middle-aged, good-looking man, dark, determined, with something a little sinister in his expression, Sherman was the sort, I fancied, that one should be careful in dealing with.

He continued to write, unconcernedly, for two or three minutes; then, laying his pen aside, he sat upright, turned in his chair, and gave us a quick searching inspection.

"Yes?" he said in sharp, matter-of-fact tones. "Which is Mr. Morrison?"

"I am Mr. Morrison," I answered.

"Live in the little cottage along the cove, don't you?" he said. "Writing man, aren't you? Thought I'd heard you were. Nice place to do writing in, I should think. What is it—fiction? Just so —wish you good luck. Well—and this advertisement, Mr. Morrison? See the nucleus of a plot in it? Is that it?"

He showed a set of very fine white teeth under his dark moustache; evidently he had no idea of the real object of our visit.

"No, that's not it, Mr. Sherman," said I. "I called to tell you that I have the memorandum book you advertised for. I found it."

He showed a momentary surprise, but nothing very remarkable. And he stretched out a hand.

"That's good," he said. "Got it with you?"

Steppe and I had already determined our plan of action, and I at once handed over the book, watching Sherman narrowly. As we had anticipated, he turned straight to the pocket in which Steppe's card still rested.

"Good!" he repeated. "Much obliged to you. Well——"

He turned with a smile to a drawer at his side, took something that rustled from it, and with a continuation of the smile offered it to me.

"Largesse!" he said. "And many thanks with it!"

I shook my head, motioning him to put the five-pound note back.

"No, no!' I said. "I don't want any reward, Mr. Sherman. Take it as a neighbourly action. But," I continued, as, a little surprised, he drew the money back, "I'd be glad if you'd tell me why there's such value attached to a very ordinary memorandum book —if it's no secret."

"Oh, I don't mind telling you!" he answered promptly, tossing the bank-note into the drawer again. "And if you won't take the reward, you must let me send you a pheasant now and then when I start shooting them next October—I hope to have some fine birds this autumn. Why I want the book,

now? Oh, that's simple. I don't want the book at all—what was wanted was what is in the book—the visiting card!"

"That certainly appeals to me," I said invitingly. "May I ask why?"

"To be sure!" he answered readily. "This card was given to my secretary, Mr. Marx, by a young journalist whom he interviewed some time ago on the subject of doing some very special work for me. Marx put the card in this—his—new memorandum book. Not long afterwards he, Marx, was staying down here with one of my staff, Mr. Vosper, and he and Vosper went out walking in the neighbourhood a good deal; I hadn't joined them. Marx lost this book. Then, when I came, and we revived the question of employing this young fellow, the card wasn't at hand, and Marx, who has a very poor memory, couldn't remember either the man's name or the name of the paper on which he'd had some employment. Now I want that young fellow—he was the most likely of the three or four men Marx interviewed on my behalf—I want him to go abroad for me, and at once. So, of course, I was anxious to recover his card. Much obliged to you again for bringing it."

He nodded at me, as if to intimate that that was all there was to say about it and that we might go. But I sat fast—with a glance at Steppe.

"Mr. Sherman," I said, "I saw this card, and

read what was on it—Mr. Richard Steppe. *Daily Planet.* And after what you have just told me, you will, I am sure, be interested to hear that this is Mr. Steppe—himself!"

CHAPTER XI

MR. ROBERT SHERMAN

I have rarely seen a man so obviously taken aback as Sherman was when I made this blunt announcement. His manner, which until then had been something like carelessly frank and off-hand, changed altogether; he became, instantly, reserved and suspicious.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "Oh! So you are the Steppe referred to on this card? This is your card?"

"I am Steppe!" replied my companion promptly. "That's the card I gave your man—whose name I wasn't supplied with."

There was a note in Steppe's voice which made Sherman glance at both of us, one after the other, more particularly, and, I thought, with increased suspicion.

"And—how do you come to be together, you two?" he asked. "I understand how you, Morrison, found the book with the card in it, but——"

"I should think it needs no explanation, Mr. Sherman," I broke in. "Finding the card in the book, I naturally went off to find the card's owner. I think you must see why, if you consider what has recently taken place hereabouts. I wanted to hear

from Mr. Steppe what his card was doing in a book found a few yards from the place whereat one man had been kidnapped and another murdered."

We were both watching him steadily, and he saw that we were—and to tell the truth, he gave us back equally steady looks.

"Oh!" he said. "You refer to the Peters and Mallett affair? Just so. You found the card—eh?"

"Close by the spot, Mr. Sherman, at which there were obvious signs of a struggle, and not very far from the place in the adjacent wood where Mallett's dead body was discovered," I replied.

"And—you wondered if the card—book and card—had anything to do with those affairs?" he suggested. "Is that it?"

"That is it, Mr. Sherman," I answered. "I did."

He continued to eye me steadily, toying with Steppe's card, which he had picked up from his desk.

"You'd better be quite frank, Morrison," he said suddenly. "What's in your mind?"

I felt sure that frankness—to a certain degree—was my proper game, and I responded readily.

"I'm not quite sure what is in my mind now, Mr. Sherman," I said. "But I can tell you what was in my mind. I was mixed up in the first investigation into Peters' disappearance; I was present—or nearly so—when Mallett's dead body was found in the

wood. I found the memorandum book and the card in its pocket, and I kept that to myself. But the night before these things happened, I chanced, by accident, to see two strange men in the woods between the Starboard Light and my cottage, and to hear them talking in a strange language——''

"Vosper and Marx!'' he muttered, interrupting. "Vosper and Marx, of course!''

"You admit that?'' I asked.

"I admit nothing—for I don't know, yet, what you're getting at, Morrison, though I've a pretty good idea!'' he answered. "I've no doubt that those two men were Vosper and Marx—they were down here, together, at that date. They were probably conversing in their native tongue—they're Hungarians, both of them, and naturally, when together, speak Magyar. Well?''

"Well, Mr. Sherman, I thought it possible—probable, if you like—that these men had something to do with the affair of next day,'' I said boldly. "Who wouldn't?''

He smiled at that, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"I dare say you had grounds,'' he replied. "But I'll soon settle that for you. This place, you see, is a sort of quiet retreat for myself—a nice spot to come to for a week-end, or a day or two off when one gets tired of town and business—I took it for that special purpose. Now and then I have friends and associates here, and sometimes I send some of my staff

down. Vosper and Marx were here at the time we're talking of, certainly, and I haven't a doubt they were the two men you saw and heard in the wood; they're fond of country walks, and I wonder you've never seen them before, for they've been here, either as my guests when I was present, or by themselves, several times. But as to their having any connection with the Peters-Mallett affair, I'll soon reassure you that they've none. The exact date was''—he paused, and going across to a side-table, turned over a pile of folded newspapers, one of which he selected and brought back. Laying it on the desk before him, he drew out a pocket diary, and opened it at a certain page. ''Now, then,'' he proceeded, ''let's get to bedrock facts. According to this newspaper, in which there's an account of the opening of the inquest on Mallett, and some reference to Mr. Peters, the latter left the Starboard Light Inn at about 9 o'clock on the morning of April 19th. Very good—whoever laid hands on Mr. Peters must have done so after that hour. Now, according to my diary, I met Vosper and Marx at 10.30 that very morning at my office in Wine Office Court, Fleet Street; they had left Wickhampton Station, in order to meet me, by the 7.45 express to town. And I kept seeing Vosper and Marx, off and on, all that day; I saw Marx during the evening at the House of Commons, where he came to bring me some papers; I saw Marx and Vosper soon after nine next morning at the aforesaid office—no,

my friend, I'm afraid Vosper and Marx could set up a very successful alibi. They have nothing whatever to do with the Peters-Mallett affair, of course. The dropping of this memorandum book in the place where you found it was purely accidental. Is all that clear to you?"

"As you put it, Mr. Sherman, yes," I agreed. "But you'll admit that I had good ground for seeking out Steppe?"

"I'm very glad you did seek out Steppe," he said, with some approach to his original friendly demeanour. "As I said before, I want Steppe. Now that I've found you, Steppe, we'll arrange, before you go, for a meeting in town. But this affair—you're interested, both of you, in this Peters business?"

"I think there's all the making of a first-class mystery in it, Mr. Sherman," said I. "It seems pretty baffling."

Before replying, he reached for a cigarette-box which stood on his desk, and after handing it to us in turn, lighted a cigarette himself and lay back in his elbow-chair in an attitude which suggested confidential conversation. All his air of suspicion and watchfulness had gone now; he began to unbend.

"Of course," he said suddenly, after smoking in silence for a minute or two, "of course, you know who Peters really is?"

"Do you, Mr. Sherman?" I asked, affecting innocence. "Isn't he—Peters?"

He shook his head at me.

"No good, my boy," he answered. "You don't take me in. If you don't know, I'll lay a pound to a penny that Steppe does. Peters, of course, is Petherwin, Chancellor of the Exchequer—who, according to the official announcement made in the House yesterday afternoon, is indisposed and in the country."

"How many people are aware of this, Mr. Sherman?" I inquired.

"More than some folk would imagine, Morrison," he answered. "Of course, you knew it. Come, now?"

"Well, you may take it that we did, then," I admitted. "But that doesn't explain his disappearance nor Mallett's murder."

"Do you think Petherwin's disappearance had anything to do with Mallett's murder?" he asked. "They synchronized, no doubt. But our police have such a habit of jumping at conclusions from the first bit of evidence they get. Merely because Mallett is found shot at the time of Peters', or Petherwin's, vanishing, the police connect one fact with the other. But is there any connection?"

"There seemed to be," said I. "And yet——"

"Ah, yes, just so!" he interrupted, seeing me hesitate. "And yet, of course—and yet . . . when you begin to think more coolly about it, the connection isn't quite so easy to see, eh? Mallett may have been murdered for one of several reasons, but his murder

may have had nothing whatever to do with the other affair, in any way. The shooting of Mallett's one thing; the extraordinary disappearance of the Right Honourable Charles Petherwin—another."

Neither Steppe nor I made any reply to this. But after a brief silence, during which he offered us more cigarettes, I plumped him with a question.

"Mr. Sherman," I said, "I believe you are a great financial authority, and as proprietor and editor of a financial journal you doubtless know a lot that isn't known to the general public. Do you know of anything that's happened in the financial world since the disappearance of Mr. Petherwin? I mean anything that could be traced to his disappearance?"

"No," he answered promptly. "No, Morrison, nothing's happened."

"Mr. Petherwin," I continued, "was, I believe, supposed to have the secret details of his forthcoming Budget—now postponed—in his possession. Supposing he had—and supposing he was kidnapped so that his captors could get hold of those secrets—how would they benefit? I mean—how could a gang of unscrupulous operators make money out of getting to know Budget secrets beforehand?"

He laughed—as if at my ignorance.

"Oh, in all sorts of ways, Morrison!" he answered. "Scores of ways—many of a highly intricate and delicate nature. Others—obvious. Now, for instance, to take a very obvious one—supposing you were a manu-

facturer of motor-cars in, say, the United States, or in France, or in Italy, sending your manufactures in here free of all duty, and you got to know secretly that on and from a certain date all foreign manufactured cars sent in here were to have a duty of thirty-three and a third per cent. stuck on them—what would you do?"

"Get as many in before the certain date, I suppose," I answered.

"Just so," he said approvingly. "Well, that's only one instance. There might be no end of others. An astute financier, knowing beforehand the Budget proposals, could make all sorts of successful coups—oh yes!"

"And you haven't heard of anything?" I repeated.

He waved his hand in a gesture of decision.

"Nothing!" he answered. "Nothing at all!"

"That makes the disappearance of Mr. Petherwin all the more remarkable, doesn't it?" I suggested.

"The disappearance of Petherwin is remarkable," he said. "A very remarkable thing indeed. But it mayn't have been—I'm supposing with you, just for the sake of supposition, you know, that he had been kidnapped—that he was spirited away for reasons of purely financial gain to his kidnappers. The reasons may have been—political."

I scarcely understood him, and made no comment, and he went on, obviously enjoying the opportunity of impressing us.

"And they may have been—international!" he said, with a sort of wink. "International! If Petherwin really has been kidnapped, it has been by very clever people whose object is one of the most serious nature. But mind you, Morrison, I say—if!"

"If he hasn't been kidnapped, where is he?" I asked.

He spread out his hands and shrugged his shoulders.

"Heaven knows!" he answered. "But Petherwin, in addition to being a Chancellor of the Exchequer, a statesman, a politician, and all the rest of it, is also a man—and an unmarried man, free to shake a loose leg. His sudden disappearance may be due to entirely private causes. He disappeared, mind you, not as the Right Honourable Charles Petherwin, M.P., Chancellor of the Exchequer in His Majesty's present Government, but as plain Mr. Peters, a quiet, apparently inoffensive, middle-aged gentleman, evidently of ample means, who came occasionally to a very obscure seaside inn, and was known there as a geologist and fossil-hunter. Eh?"

"Well, sir?" I said encouragingly. "And—what then?"

"Why—is he to be looked for as Petherwin, or as Peters—which?" he retorted, laughing cynically.

"You can't look for him as both—he must be sought for either as Peters, pure and simple, or as—Petherwin. If as Peters—then you'll have to go a great deal

into the history of Peters. If Peters has been Peters on several occasions at the Starboard Light Inn, he's doubtless been Peters elsewhere—do you see that? Without suggesting anything diabolical, this is something of a Jekyll and Hyde case. And, between you and me, young men, if I wanted to go deeply into the affair, there's a man whom I should question pretty severely if I could only oblige him to answer—the valet, Lassiter. Lassiter probably knows a lot. So, too, I imagine, does the landlord of the Starboard Light Inn—Withers. Neither, so far, has been questioned before any court of inquiry. They ought to be! Now," he concluded, rising from his chair, "you must run away—I have to work when I'm down here as well as when I'm in town. Steppe—you come to see me any morning next week in Wine Office Court —I've a fine job for you."

He sent us off without further word or ceremony, and once clear of the house, we walked for some minutes in silence—broken at last by Steppe.

"Morrison, this is a damned queer case!" he burst out. "I guess your two foreigners theory is all busted. That chap knew he was safe about them. Now, where *is* this old Petherwin—Peters. It strikes me that private notion—private life of Peters—is the game. And while we're about it, where is this Starboard Light Inn? Let's go there and see the landlord. If we can't do anything else, we can have a drink."

I took a short-cut across the woods in the direction of the Starboard Light, showing Steppe on the way the scene of the supposed struggle and the place where Mallett's body had been discovered. And just before we came to the inn, Rachel, Mallett's sister, a tragic figure in black, came round a bend of the lane, and catching sight of me, bore straight down on us.

CHAPTER XII

MISS PETHERWIN

I had not seen Rachel Mallett since the night on which she came to the Starboard Light seeking news of her brother; one glance at her showed me that she had felt his loss. But there was more than the evidence of grief in her expression; she looked like a woman who is labouring under a double sense of resentment and injustice; there were smouldering fires in her dark eyes that threatened to burst into flame at small provocation. She began to speak as soon as she came within a few yards of us, and her speech was direct enough.

"Mr. Morrison," she said, "can you tell me how it is that nothing's being done about my brother's murder—nothing, Mr. Morrison?"

"Is nothing being done?" I asked. "Aren't the police——"

She interrupted me with a contemptuous toss of her head.

"The police!" she exclaimed derisively. "I've scarcely seen the police since the very beginning of it! They asked a few questions at first, but after the inquest they've never been near me."

"Perhaps they found that you'd told them all you could?" I suggested. "You didn't know anything much yourself, did you?"

"You might say I knew nothing," she answered. "I don't know anything—that's just it! But I want to know—and they never come near to tell anything they know."

"Perhaps they've nothing to tell," I said. "I've heard nothing."

She became silent, biting her lips, and looking from one to the other of us; Steppe, I saw, was staring at her with obvious interest and admiration. I didn't wonder at that—Rachel Mallett was an undeniably handsome young woman, if a trifle Amazonian in figure, and with—in my opinion—something more than a trace of gipsy blood in her. She, in turn, fixed her attention on him, studying him from head to foot. And suddenly she asked a sharp question, nodding at him.

"Has this young man anything to do with the police?" she demanded.

"No," said I. "He's a friend of mine, Rachel."

"Interested, though—and sorry for you," said Steppe, still regarding her steadily. "Look here—haven't you got any idea, yourself, about this? I mean—as to your brother being attacked?"

"I?" she replied wonderingly. "No more than you have. Why should anybody attack him? A more peaceful-going fellow—but Mr. Morrison there

knows that. And—it maddens me to think that those who did it are going free—and the police doing nothing to lay hands on them. Mr. Morrison—it's my belief this is all being hushed up!"

"What makes you think that, Rachel?" I asked.

"What? Why, because nothing's been done!" she exclaimed. "Since they opened that inquest—and you know what a short business that was—it's as if everything was to be smoothed over, to die down. Nobody about here is hearing anything more of it. Marshall, the policeman, he says he knows no more, and he can't tell me anything of what's being done; Withers, at the Starboard Light, he says he knows of nothing to tell me. But you know, Mr. Morrison, somebody shot my brother, meaning to kill him, and did kill him, and I want that man finding—finding and punishing for what he did!"

She clenched her hands and stamped a foot, and the tears coming into her eyes and the colour into her cheeks, she looked handsomer than ever. Steppe suddenly laid a hand on my arm.

"Go along to the inn, Morrison," he whispered. "I see where it is—behind the trees there. I'll come after you—I want to have a talk to her."

I nodded and went off; looking round at the bend of the road I saw there two oddly assorted figures, Steppe in his smart grey tweed suit and Rachel in her black garments, walking slowly away towards her cottage, Steppe evidently talking earnestly to her. I

saw then that there was some Quixotic vein in Steppe, some knight-errant instinct; he was going to take up Rachel Mallett's cause. I wasn't sorry to see it —once get Steppe's youthful enthusiasm really aroused and he might hit on a trail that would lead to something definite.

Withers was in his bar-parlour, alone, when I walked into the Starboard Light. I had not seen him for several days, and he showed some surprise at my sudden appearance, not unmixed with signs of inquisitiveness.

"Thought you'd gone to London, Mr. Morrison," he said, after greeting me. "I heard you had."

"I've been in London, Withers," said I. "But I was not there long. Well—any news down here?"

"None that I know of," he answered. "That is, about *the* affair, Mr. Morrison. I'd Rachel Mallett here just now, asking the same question. Of course, I'd no news to give her. There'll be trouble in that quarter, if the police aren't careful."

"How?" I asked, looking my surprise.

"Rachel Mallett," replied Withers, "has got it into her head that for some reason or other, the police are trying to shut all this up; the reason or reasons being, of course, connected with Mr. Peters. They don't want, she says, to inquire into the murder of her brother lest something should come out about Mr. Peters that they want to keep dark. Mr. Peters, she thinks, was a gentleman of some consequence; Mallett

was only a fisherman, whose death makes no difference to anybody—so it's to be hushed-up. And she's threatening to make a nice-to-do—and you know what sort of young woman she is, Mr. Morrison—determined!"

"What does she mean to do?" I asked.

"She says she's going to get hold of one of these newspaper men and tell him all about it," replied Withers, smiling. "And, no doubt, some of those reporters would be only too glad to give her the chance of unburdening herself of her grievance—what? Such as those that got hold of you after the inquest, eh?"

I made no answer—I was wondering if, by that time, Rachel had found out that Steppe was a newspaper man; if so, I was not likely to see Steppe at the Starboard Light for the next hour or two.

"Haven't the police made any further inquiries about here?" I asked.

"None," replied Withers. "They've done nothing—that I've heard of, and I hear of most things. I've seen nothing, heard nothing. Mr. Peters' man, Lassiter, he came down here two or three days ago and fetched his master's things away. He stopped that night, and we had a bit of talk. His idea, Mr. Morrison, is that Mr. Peters is suffering from loss of memory and has wandered away. What do you think, now?"

"Don't know, Withers," I replied, reflecting on

what Lassiter had said to me, also, on that subject. "It's one theory."

"Well," continued Withers, "I said to him 'If that's so,' I said, 'why doesn't his family put out a full and accurate description of him, poor gentleman, and have it circulated in all the papers all over the kingdom?' I said. 'That seems the proper and common-sense line to adopt.' 'He hasn't got any family,' says Lassiter. 'He's a single man, a bachelor.' 'Bachelors have relatives,' says I. 'He must have somebody belonging to him.' 'Never heard of anybody,' he says, 'except a sister, who's head of some big ladies' college or school.' 'Well, why doesn't she do it, then?' I says. 'I don't know whether she knows,' he says. 'I haven't told her, yet, and I don't know if Mr. Rutherford has.' 'Ah, there you are!' says I. 'Why doesn't Rutherford do it? He's his secretary. Why hasn't he moved in the matter?' He didn't reply to that for a while, as if he was thinking. 'There's such a thing as wheels within wheels, Mr. Withers,' he says at last. 'As you know, of course.' 'What I know, Lassiter,' I says, 'is that your guv'nor isn't being sought for as he ought to be. It wants some strong-minded, resolute person to take this job in hand,' I says. And that's what I do say, Mr. Morrison—judging from what's gone up to now, the whole business has been allowed to slide."

If Withers and I had only known it, the strong-minded, resolute person he suggested was at that very

moment rapidly approaching the front door of his establishment. He had scarcely finished speaking when we heard a motor-car driving up; looking out of the bar-parlour window we saw a Wickhampton taxi-cab, its hood thrown back, in which sat a tall, buxom, elderly lady, of a strong, judicial cast of countenance, at whose side, and much over-shadowed by her, was a man, inconspicuous of general appearance but sharp of glance and shrewd of expression. There was luggage, of modest dimensions, in front, and Withers immediately made for the door.

"Visitors!" he muttered. "Nobody's written about rooms, though. However——"

The lady was at the door and over the threshold before Withers had struggled into his coat; he had been talking to me in his shirtsleeves. She advanced into the bar-parlour with the assurance and air of one born to command.

"You the landlord of this inn?" she demanded in tones that matched her deportment. "Mr. Withers, eh? Just so! Very well, Mr. Withers, I am the sister of the gentleman who disappeared from your house recently. I've come here to make my own inquiries, myself, on the spot, and I've brought this gentleman to help me—he's a famous private detective, from London. We shall want to stay here until our inquiries are ended—you have accommodations?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied Withers. "Excellent

rooms, ma'am. Mr. Peters was always very well pleased with everything we——"

The lady suddenly interrupted him—to point a stern forefinger direct at me, standing innocently in a corner.

"Who is that young man?" she asked. "Is he connected with these events in any way? Does he know anything about——?"

"My name is Morrison," I said, thinking it high time to present myself. "I supplied some information to the newspapers which supplemented the very brief proceedings of the inquest on——"

"Mallett, the fisherman, who was shot on the same day on which my brother disappeared," she broke in. "I know—I've got the newspaper account of the inquest in my bag, and the interview you gave the reporter, too. So you're Mr. Morrison, eh? Very well! Now listen to me, Mr. Morrison, and you, too, Mr. Withers—I may as well tell you that now that I've taken this case in hand there's going to be no further mystery about it—I'm determined that every card shall be put on the table, face upward. So you may as well know this—my brother, known to you as Mr. Peters, is not Mr. Peters at all. He is the Right Honourable Charles Petherwin, Chancellor of the Exchequer! He called himself Peters when he came down here—for his own purposes. But that is really who he is—Mr. Petherwin. I am Miss Petherwin, his only sister, and I'm going to find him, by hook

or crook. I told the Home Secretary only yesterday afternoon that I will have no more of this mystery—I shall let it be known at once to the papers and the world generally that it is the Chancellor of the Exchequer who is missing—indeed, I've already circulated a paragraph to the press agencies to that effect."

"May I ask how the Home Secretary received your announcement, Miss Petherwin?" I inquired.

"You may! Not at all favourably—in fact, he is very angry indeed, very!" she replied. "He used every effort and every persuasion to induce me to alter my decision—reasons of State, of course. I told him I did not care a snap of my fingers for reasons of State—nor do I. Well, here we are, and we shall go to work at once; that is, as soon as Mr. Munro—this is Mr. Clifford Munro, the famous expert—has had some lunch. Have our luggage brought in, Mr. Withers, and let your wife show me my room."

When Mrs. Withers had conducted Miss Petherwin upstairs, and the bar-parlour was once more in a state of calm, Mr. Munro asked for a whisky and soda, and having refreshed himself with a portion of it, looked meditatively first at Withers and then at me.

"A lady of great determination!" he remarked, in a soft, quiet voice which would have done credit to a vendor of silks and laces, but did not at all seem the sort of thing suited to an investigator of criminal

matters, such as I knew him, by repute to be. "A lady of very great determination! Ahem—do you gentlemen happen to know if there is much prospect of—ah—success?"

Withers shook his head; I replied for both of us.

"I think I may say there is little prospect of anything at present, Mr. Munro," I said. "The mystery of Mr. Petherwin's disappearance remains as deep as ever."

"The police don't do anything, you see, sir," remarked Withers. "Stopped off all inquiries, as it were. Hereabouts, at any rate."

"And the general impression—hereabouts—Mr. Munro," I added, with a meaning glance at him, "is that somebody, or something, wants to hush things up. Perhaps you know more about that than we do."

"I know—er—little more than I have been told, by Miss Petherwin," he replied in his curious half-hesitating way. "Miss Petherwin, I may say, is not very well informed herself. I gather, however, that her action in coming down here, to—er—collect first-hand information on the spot where her brother disappeared is not viewed with favour by the—er—high authorities whom she has interviewed. But, Miss Petherwin, as I have already remarked, is a lady of very remarkable determination—very remarkable!"

Miss Petherwin's determination to get at the bottom of things manifested itself as soon as she had eaten her lunch. She commandeered Withers' pri-

vate parlour, and there with Munro in attendance, she got me to tell her my story—which I carefully edited, keeping Mr. Alstone's injunctions to be secret in view. She gave me little trouble; I could see quite well that she had some theory of her own at the back of her mind, and that my scanty information interested her in only an inconsiderable degree. Indeed, she soon left me alone and turned her attention to Mr. and Mrs. Withers, whom she hastened to put in the witness-box and evidently regarded as highly important factors in her—probably imaginary case.

"Now, Mr. Withers," she said in her peremptory fashion, "I want to know all you can tell me about my brother's visits to your hotel under the name of Mr. Peters. When did he come first?"

"About this time last year, ma'am," replied Withers.

"And he's been—how many times since?"

"His last visit was the fourth, ma'am."

"How long did he stay each time?"

"Four or five days, ma'am—on his third visit, a week."

"And what did he do with himself while he was here?"

"We always understood he was a geological gentleman, ma'am. And interested in fossils. So Mr. Lassiter told us." Then, hesitating a little, Withers added: "For a gentleman who was out all day, engaged in those pursuits, ma'am, I don't think Mr.

Peters got much in the way of results. I never saw much, though he did carry a hammer and a bag."

"Was he always out all day?" asked Miss Petherwin.

"All day, ma'am. Sometimes he'd come in to lunch—but if he did, he'd go out again until evening."

"Alone—or did Lassiter go with him?"

"Lassiter never went with him, ma'am. Mr. Peters always went alone."

"Not saying, of course, in which particular direction he was going?"

"Oh, dear me, no, ma'am! He never said where he was going."

Miss Petherwin hesitated for a moment. Then, reminding me very much of eminent counsel about to put a particularly important question, she eyed us all round before leaning forward and fixing her witness with a penetrating look.

"Now, Mr. Withers," she said in tones indicative of the tremendous importance of the question, "I want to ask you a very serious question indeed, and I want a plain answer. Have you any idea—idea of your own—secret idea, you know—as to where Mr. Peters, as you call him, really spent his time when he was down here? If you have—say!"

I don't know whether Withers felt as much surprised at this question as I did—I confess that it took me aback, for I suddenly saw what Miss Petherwin

was after. But whatever Withers felt, he replied promptly, exchanging glances with his wife as he opened his lips.

"Well, ma'am," he said, "since you ask me, and since things are as they are, I may as well say straight out that though me and my wife are not given to tale-telling, we have reason to believe that on all the occasions when Mr. Peters was here, he spent the main part of his days at Vimiera Cottage!"

CHAPTER XIII

VIMIERA COTTAGE

Of the three people who heard Withers' answer to Miss Petherwin's question, I think I was the one who felt—and perhaps slightly showed—surprise; the reason, of course, was that while neither Miss Petherwin nor her companion knew anything of our neighbourhood, I did. Vimiera Cottage! I had never thought of that in connection with Mr. Peters' disappearance. To be sure, I knew next to nothing of Vimiera Cottage, though I just did know that there was such a place and that it had an occasional tenant in spring and summer. But Withers knew more, and said what he knew in answer to Miss Petherwin's immediately forthcoming question.

"Vimiera Cottage? And what is Vimiera Cottage, pray, and where, and who lives there?"

"Vimiera Cottage, ma'am," replied Withers, "is a sort of bungalow place, a one-storied building, near the coast, at the extreme end of Strillion Cove—a very lonely spot, ma'am, not much visited. It was built some years ago by an artist gentleman from London, Mr. Rawlinson, but it's a long time since he came there—indeed, I don't know if he sold it, or what was

done about it. But during this last year or so, there's a young lady artist comes there occasionally—a Miss Travis. She comes now and then—by herself—and stays a week or two at a time, painting. I don't know if Mr. Morrison has ever seen her?—it's a fair way from his place to hers."

"No," I answered. "I've never seen her. I've heard that a lady artist did come to that cottage occasionally, but I didn't even know her name; I've scarcely ever been in that direction."

Miss Petherwin, whose expression had become extremely severe, rapped out a question.

"How old is this person?"

"A young lady, ma'am—quite young," replied Withers.

"You've seen her?"

"I've seen her once, ma'am—had her pointed out to me."

"Then you can make a guess at her age," said Miss Petherwin severely. "What do you mean by quite young?"

"Well, I should say she's a young lady of maybe two or three and twenty, ma'am."

"A mere girl! Is she good looking?"

"A very pretty young lady, ma'am," answered Withers. Then, growing bolder, he added: "What you call a fine young woman, ma'am—uncommon!"

"A very pretty girl indeed, Miss Petherwin," remarked Mrs. Withers soothingly. "One of those with

real gold hair and blue eyes—I saw her, just once, close to, in Wickhampton Street. Smart, too, she was—London style."

Miss Petherwin's countenance was growing darker and darker; I began to wonder if her missing brother was, within her knowledge, susceptible to feminine charm, and if she was already suspecting him.

"How do you know my brother used to spend most of his time at this place?" she demanded. "Do you know—or is it just mere gossip?"

"I think we may say we know, ma'am," answered Withers, with decision. "There's a cottage, a fisherman's place, close by Vimiera Cottage, and the woman who lives in it, Mrs. Hepper, comes here to do a day's work now and then——"

"She's not here to-day, Miss Petherwin, or she would bear out what my husband says," interrupted Mrs. Withers. "But she's a thoroughly honest, truthful woman——"

"Well!" broke in Miss Petherwin impatiently. "What has she told you?"

Withers glanced at his wife—the glance plainly invited her to speak. Mrs. Withers smiled—indulgently.

"Why, Miss Petherwin, nothing much. Only that she'd often seen the gentleman who was staying here go to Vimiera Cottage, and going out walking with the young lady on the beach and to the woods, and had sometimes seen him sitting by her while she painted

her pictures. Country folk will talk, you know, ma'am."

By this time Miss Petherwin's expression had become very dark. She sat staring at Mrs. Withers in a portentous silence. Munro, very meek of countenance, drew his breath in a soft sigh.

"Why—why was this young person not questioned at the time of my brother's disappearance?" Miss Petherwin suddenly demanded. "Why?"

She addressed her question to the room in general; nobody answered it. As for me, all this had been news. Withers shook his head and stared at the ceiling. But Mrs. Withers presently found words.

"Well, you see, Miss Petherwin, I suppose nobody connected Mr. Peters and the young lady—it's a very lonely place, that Vimiera Cottage. And, to be sure, I don't know that Miss Travis was there at all on this last occasion. She may have been, but I don't know that she was. I didn't have Mrs. Hepper here at all about that time—she only comes occasionally, when we're unusually busy."

Miss Petherwin made a sound which can only be described as a grunt.

"Did you ever hear my brother's valet mention this young person?" she asked abruptly.

"Oh no, ma'am!" exclaimed Withers. "Never, ma'am! Lassiter, ma'am, is a very discreet individual, as you may say—very retiring in his speech, ma'am."

Again there was a period of silence—broken by Munro.

"I think," he said softly, addressing himself to Miss Petherwin, "I think—if I may suggest it—it would be advisable—after what we have heard—to—er—visit Vimiera Cottage."

"That, Munro, is precisely what I'm going to do—and at once!" snapped out Miss Petherwin. "And as we don't know this district, and Mr. Morrison does, he will no doubt act as guide. Let us go."

I went—not because of Miss Petherwin's commandeering of my services, but out of sheer curiosity. It seemed to me that if it had not been for the murder of poor Mallett this thing might be developing into comedy—perhaps Mr. Petherwin had run away with the pretty young artist! And the next time Miss Petherwin opened her lips—which was when she, Munro, and I had left the inn and were setting out towards Strillion Cove—encouraged me in my supposition.

"There is no use in denying facts," she growled, giving me one look and Munro another. "My brother may have been a splendid business man in his time, and he may be a leading statesman, and a most expert financier, but he is a perfect fool in his admiration of pretty young women—I have had trouble with him before. I suppose he's lost his head over this painting person—I only hope we can find her."

"I don't think that's at all likely, Miss Petherwin," said I. "I should say that when Mr. Peters disappeared Miss Travis disappeared, too. That is —if what you seem to suggest is correct."

"Well—if she's at all known as an artist, I can trace her," she retorted. "Munro will run her to earth very quickly if she's known at all. But the artist business may be all bluff—probably she's some actress or other."

"Odd reflections on your brother, aren't they, Miss Petherwin?" I ventured to suggest. "I only saw Mr. Peters—I always forget to call him by his real name—and I thought what a very benevolent, beaming——"

"Mr. Morrison!" she interrupted, "I am one of those downright folk who make it a practice to call a spade a spade. I've already told you that my brother is a perfect fool where a pretty face is concerned—it makes it no better that he's an elderly fool. What does a pretty girl of twenty-two or three want with an old fellow of sixty, even if he is well preserved?"

"Afraid I don't follow you at all, Miss Petherwin," I answered. "Sixty? Why, a man's still young at sixty, nowadays. And I believe that young ladies have a liking for the attentions of clever, middle-aged men. There's probably some strong reciprocity of intellectual feeling between Mr. Petherwin and Miss Travis——"

"Strong—fiddlesticks!" she exclaimed with asperity. "Don't talk silliness, young man! This is a serious matter!"

"The murder of Mallett, the fisherman, is a serious matter, Miss Petherwin," I said boldly. "Far more serious than the disappearance of your brother ——especially if that disappearance is merely due to some love affair, as you seem to think. Mallett was deliberately shot through the heart, and if, as we all thought at first, that occurred in defending your brother——"

"I know—I know!" she said hastily. "Most deplorable! But do you think it was so? Do you think the two affairs had any real connection?"

"I think it would be a splendid thing, as you have brought him here, if Mr. Munro could bring his great skill to bear on the question," said I. "The police seem to be doing nothing."

Miss Petherwin gave me a glance that was almost a wink.

"That's the powers-that-be!" she said. "The Home Secretary nearly went on his knees yesterday afternoon to beg me not to interfere. Of course, I didn't pay the least attention to him! He actually came near to—well, not to threatening me, but to talk towards it when he found that entreaty and cajolery were of no avail. I laughed at him. 'My dear sir!' I said. 'You can't frighten Henrietta Petherwin! We don't live in the days of Louis the Six-

teenth! You can't issue a *lettre de cachet* against me! I'm going to find Charles Petherwin—it's my duty!' 'I wish you'd think less of your duty and more of the scandal you'll cause!' he said bitterly. 'Just remember your brother's official position.' 'I do not care a fig for my brother's official position!' I retorted. 'And as for the Government of which he's a pillar, I'm in opposition to it.' And I walked out, leaving him looking as if he'd just bitten into a sour apple!"

"You are a woman of character and courage, Miss Petherwin," I said admiringly. "But, after all, I suppose the authorities are seeking your brother in accordance with their own methods. Of course, they are!"

"Welcome to!" she retorted. "I'll take mine! I'm going to know where Charles has got to. And if this girl's got anything to do with it——"

I don't know what she proposed to do with the girl; she didn't finish her sentence, but switched off into discussing plans and probabilities with Munro. And so we came to Vimiera Cottage, a one-storied bungalow set in a lonely reach of the extreme end of Strillion Cove. It was an even more retired and solitary place than my own cottage, and I marvelled that any young woman, however independent and modern she might be or profess to be, should like to live there, alone, for even two or three days.

Vimiera Cottage was close shut, tenantless. But

none of the blinds were drawn over the windows, and by walking round we got a full view of the various rooms. I don't know what Munro, as an expert, deduced from what he saw, but I know what I very quickly decided upon in the way of conclusion. Whenever Miss Travis had left her cottage she had left it in the expectation of returning to it. Also, she had left it early in the morning. In the bedroom the bed was unmade. In the sitting-room, the remains of a breakfast for one still lay on the table. In the kitchen, on a side-table by the sink, was a collection of crockery evidently placed there in readiness for a grand washing-up. On an easel in a small room fitted up as a studio stood a water-colour drawing, half finished; on a desk in the window lay several opened letters, apparently put there in readiness to be answered. Feminine apparel, smart and modish, was in evidence everywhere—clearly, its owner, on going out, had expected to come back. But she had not gone out recently. It was a small place; the windows were close to the inner fittings, and I saw that on a half-loaf of bread standing in its platter on the sitting-room table a green mould had gathered. Miss Travis had been gone some days.

My observations were broken in upon by Miss Petherwin demanding to be led to the cottage of Mrs. Hepper. That had to be sought for; we found it round a spur of the cliffs; we found its occupant, too; an

elderly woman whom I recognized as having seen in the neighbourhood now and then. And in answer to Miss Petherwin's first, direct question Mrs. Hepper shook her head.

"No, m'm, Miss Travis, she ain't at the cottage at present," she answered. "She comes and goes what you might call sudden, like. You never know when she'll come, and you never know when she'll go; she ain't got what I call no fixed times."

"When was she here last?" demanded Miss Petherwin.

Mrs. Hepper, like a true rustic, took time to consider this. Finally she came to a definite conclusion.

"Well, it would be all about the time when Mallett met his end," she said. "Now I come to study it, the last time I see Miss Travis would be the day before I hear of what had happened to Mallett."

"Where did you see her, Mrs. Hepper?" I inquired, cutting in before Miss Petherwin could say more. "Anywhere about her cottage?"

"I see her, sir, a-passing of my cottage," replied Mrs. Hepper. "Which she gave me a good-morning. She was going towards the woods yonder, with a big green book under her arm, what she used to make pictures in."

"What time would that be?" I asked.

"All about the middle of the morning, sir—ten o'clock, maybe. I ain't never seen her since then.

But as I say,'' added Mrs. Hepper, with emphasis, ''she come and go like the wind—you never knew when.''

That was all I wanted to know. But Miss Petherwin wanted to know more.

''My good woman,'' she said, ''I understand you work at Mrs. Withers' inn sometimes. No doubt you have seen Mr. Peters there? Very good—have you ever seen him in company with this young lady, Miss Travis?''

Mrs. Hepper tossed her chin.

''Lor' bless you, yes, m'm!'' she answered. ''If she was here when he was there, he spent most of his time with her, either in her cottage, or out of it. Went walks with her, and sat with her when she was painting her pictures, and such like. Seen 'em together many a time!''

This was apparently enough for Miss Petherwin, and after another question or two she turned away. We went back towards the Starboard Light, in more or less silence. Just as we came in sight of it, Steppe emerged from the door, beckoning me and waving the buff envelope of a telegram.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PRIME MINISTER'S WIRE

I went forward, alone, to meet Steppe; he, too, hastened in my direction, at the same time pointing towards the front of the inn, where I saw a telegraph boy waiting with his red bicycle.

"That youngster's been down to your cottage with this," said Steppe, thrusting the telegram into my hand. "He chanced to ask at the Starboard Inn if they'd seen you, so I took it from him and told him to wait a bit; I guess that's something you'll want to answer."

I tore open the envelope and saw at once that the message was from the Prime Minister—and terse enough in its wording:

"Come here immediately.—ALSTONE."

I handed the form to Steppe and moved off to the telegraph boy; two minutes later I had given him an answer in one word: "Coming." And a minute after that, I was turning over Withers' railway-guide. Having got what I wanted from it, I pulled Steppe into the road again.

"That was from Mr. Alstone," I said. "He wants

me there, at once. You'd better come—we can just get the local train to Wickhampton, and an express there that'll strike Waterloo at eight o'clock. But we must be off—now!"

"Right!" he answered. "Go ahead!"

I turned straight up the lane to the station, without as much as a glance at my late companions, who were by this time talking to Withers and his wife in front of the inn.

"Who's the formidable lady and the little man?" asked Steppe, as we hurried along. "Anything to do with this affair?"

"A good deal," said I. "That's Miss Petherwin—the Chancellor's maiden sister, and a lady of character and determination, Steppe. She's come down here intent on tracking her brother, and she's brought Munro, the private detective, with her."

"Good Lord! Is that Munro?" he exclaimed. "Shouldn't have thought it—big reputation, though, has Munro. Well—anything materialized?"

"Perhaps," said I. "Bit of light—or, I should say, a new development. Mrs. Withers put us on a new and surprising—and a somewhat amusing—track. There's a young lady in the case, now. Listen!" I proceeded to give him a brief account of the afternoon's proceedings up to the point at which his delivery of the telegram had interrupted them. "What do you make of that, Steppe?" I asked. "Is it a case of elopement—or what?"

For a moment Steppe made no reply. Then he suddenly thrust his hand round to the left inside of his Norfolk jacket, in which he had a specially made big and deep pocket, from which I had more than once seen him produce papers and books. He drew out an oblong parcel in brown paper, say twelve inches long by eight wide and an inch or two deep.

"Look here, Morrison," he said. "I reckon I've made a discovery that'll supplement that tale. You know that I went off with the girl, Rachel Mallett, when you went on to the Starboard Light—I wanted to have a thorough talk to her about the whole affair from her angle. Well, we had a talk, and she and I went down to the spot where her brother was found, and I had a real good look round there, in that lane and in the woods. And I found—this."

He had been divesting his parcel of its brown paper wrapping as he spoke, and now he drew out and showed me a sketch-book, bound in green canvas, and obviously the worse for damp and exposure.

"Good Lord!" said I. "Miss Travis's, of course!"

"I guess that's so—after what you've told me," he said. "And see, there are initials inside this cover —E. T. To be sure, it's this girl's you've been talking about."

"Where did you find it?" I asked.

"Lying underneath some bushes, top of a bank, farther down that lane in which, according to what Rachel Mallett told me, the struggle took place," he

answered. "It lay in the grass, face downwards, at this page—see? Now look at that page—you'll notice that Miss Travis was sketching an oak-tree. Well, that oak-tree is on the opposite side of the lane—I recognized it at once. Something had interrupted her in her work—she'd laid book and pencil—I've got the pencil—down in the grass at her side . . . and she never went back to 'em. Eh?"

"Good!" said I. "We're getting along! Curious, though, that nobody's noticed that book before!"

"Well, I don't know," he answered. "It was right on top of the bank—she'd evidently climbed up there to sketch the old tree—and I couldn't have found it myself if I hadn't been making a pretty thorough cast-round. You see how it's suffered from exposure? Fairly well soaked with damp. That it's Miss Travis's sketch-book is a moral certainty."

"No doubt!" I agreed. "Well, what do you make of things now, Steppe?"

He wrapped up his find again and returned it to the capacious pocket.

"Morrison," he said gravely, "I don't think there's the slightest question that the first notion is the correct one. Peters, or Petherwin, has been carried off! I think that's dead certain. After what Sherman told us this morning, I suppose it would be a very difficult thing to connect him and his two men, Vosper and Marx, with the affair—if all three were actually in Wine Office Court during the whole of the day on

which Peters disappeared and Mallett was murdered, you couldn't convict them of active participation. But—supposing they engineered the thing?"

"Employing other men to carry it out?" I suggested.

"Precisely! It's not improbable," he answered. "Sherman, you may bet, knew Peters' habits when down at Rumbelow Point. For all he said to us this morning, Sherman may have something to do with this affair—and if he has, you can be sure it has been damned cleverly contrived!"

"Except the shooting of Mallett!" I said.

"Just so. I reckon they made a fine mistake there," he admitted. "I'll tell you how I figure the whole thing out. I think Peters was attacked while with Miss Travis; I think Mallett went to their assistance; I think that when Mallett had been settled, poor chap, they carried Miss Travis and Peters off. That's it."

"Both?" I exclaimed.

"Where is she?" he asked. "If she'd been at liberty, she'd have been in evidence long since. Of course—these chaps, whoever they are, have got her as well as Peters! And they've got to be found! I've promised that girl Rachel I'll do all in my power to find her brother's murderer, and I will!"

"I'm sorry for that girl, Steppe," I said.

"So am I," he answered laconically. "She's a damn fine girl!"

We were close to the little wayside station by that time, and just in time for the local train to Wickhampton which connected with the London express. Being Saturday, there were few people going townwards, and we got a smoking compartment to ourselves and began to discuss our business again.

"There's one thing rather puzzles me about this affair, Steppe," I said, when we were fairly off. "If Miss Travis has been kidnapped in company with Petherwin, how is it that her people haven't set inquiries afoot?"

"Mayn't have any people," he answered. "And if she has, how do they know she isn't down there in safety at her cottage? According to all you've heard about her, Miss Travis is an independent young woman who comes and goes as she likes. Therefore, nobody will have missed her."

"Probably—when you come to think of it," I admitted. "However, Miss Petherwin will set to work on her trail. Miss Petherwin, from what I've seen and heard of her this morning, will argue that where Miss Travis is, there Petherwin will be."

"I don't think there's any doubt of it," said Steppe. "But this contiguity doesn't arise from what Miss Petherwin fancies. I think Miss Travis disappeared because she was with Petherwin at the critical moment. And that means something."

"What does it mean?" I asked.

"Why, that the kidnapping party couldn't waste

time," he answered. "They'd got to get Petherwin just then, alone or accompanied. I wish one had even a slight clue to their identity."

"There is a clue," I said. "The bit of light chestnut coloured hair that was found tightly grasped in Mallett's fingers."

"You can't go searching all round England for a man who's had a scrap of hair torn out of his scalp!" he replied. "That's impossible! If you could get into a set of men whom you believe to have had something to do with the affair, and then found out that one of 'em had hair of that particular colour—why, then you might feel yourself on the track, but otherwise, no, that's of no great account. But have you heard what the local police did about that?"

"No," said I. "Have you?"

"Rachel Mallett told me. They combed out the district, making every chestnut-headed chap they could find give an account of himself!" replied Steppe scornfully. "That's one way of spending valuable time. It won't pay us to follow their example."

"What are you going to do about calling on Sherman in regard to this job he wants you to take up?" I asked.

"Nothing—till I've seen this through," he answered. "I've still a certain amount of suspicion about Sherman, and I'm not going to enter into business relations with a man that's suspect. And, look here—you're going to see the P.M. as soon as we

get in, of course. Where can I meet you later?"

"Same hotel," I said. "I'll go there as soon as I'm through at Downing Street. If I haven't turned up, wait. If I'm late, take a room there for the night, so that I can find you when I get in. There's sure to be something highly important."

"Yes," he said, nodding. "I guess it'll be more important than you think, Morrison. And don't be surprised if you find that you've been summoned to receive your dismissal."

"Dismissal?" I exclaimed. "What d'you mean?"

"You know what Miss Petherwin told you about the Home Secretary?" he answered. "Well, it may be that the supreme powers don't want publicity and that they wish to draw off—eh?"

"Too late," said I. "Miss Petherwin's taken the field!"

"Maybe—and maybe they'll have means of silencing her," said Steppe. "There's one fact obvious—the powers that be, unless they've done something that we know nothing about, have bestirred themselves precious little to find Mr. Peters. And—perhaps they have found him!"

Steppe and I parted at Waterloo, and I, jumping into a taxi-cab, hastened to Downing Street. I was evidently expected at No. 10, for I was immediately admitted and shown into a private room with an intimation that Mr. Alstone would see me presently. Before many minutes had passed, Mr. Alstone came

in, accompanied by an elderly, keen-faced man in whom I recognized Mr. Cazalette, the Home Secretary, who, like his chief, had been famous in his time as a big man at the Bar. Mr. Cazalette gave me the sort of look that sizes anything up at a glance; Mr. Alstone smiled.

"Well, Morrison, there you are!" he said good humouredly. "Thank you for coming at once. I got your letter saying you were going down to Rumbelow Point, which was why I wired to you at your address there. I wanted to ask you a question that you could answer at once and in person—has Miss Petherwin been to Rumbelow Point?"

"Yes, sir," I replied promptly. "Miss Petherwin is there now; that is, I left her there at half-past four this afternoon. She arrived there this morning."

The Prime Minister looked at the Home Secretary; the Home Secretary's grim countenance remained sphinx-like. Mr. Alstone turned to me again.

"Has she made it known that Mr. Peters is Mr. Petherwin?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. I was at the Starboard Light Inn when Miss Petherwin arrived—about noon," I answered. "Miss Petherwin came there with Mr. Munro, the private detective. She immediately announced to the landlord and his wife that she was Miss Petherwin, and told them who Mr. Peters really was——"

"They hadn't known before, of course?" interrupted Mr. Alstone.

"No, sir. Miss Petherwin," I continued, "then announced that she had come there for the express purpose of finding her brother, and had brought Mr. Munro to help her; she further announced that she would have no more privacy or secrecy in the matter, and had told the Home Secretary of her intentions——"

Mr. Cazalette made a wry face as if at some unpalatable recollection, and snapped out in four words:

"In very plain language!"

"After which, sir," I went on, "and after receiving a communication from Mrs. Withers, Miss Petherwin proceeded to begin her investigations, and pressed me into service. The receipt of your telegram put an end to my share—I came away at once."

"What communication did Miss Petherwin receive from Mrs. Withers—that's the landlady, eh?" asked Mr. Alstone. "Something new?"

I told him the Vimiera Cottage story, supplementing it with Steppe's discovery of Miss Travis's sketch-book. And that done, I harked back and told them all about the tracing of Steppe's card and the visit to Sherman, and of my own adventure at my cottage; eventually they were in full possession of all I knew. And while I talked both kept a close silence, watching me and listening intently; when I had finished, they looked at each other, still in silence. After a time Mr. Alstone spoke.

"It seems useless to keep this thing secret any longer," he said. "This Petherwin woman——"

Before he could say more, the door opened, and a man who was evidently confident about his right of entry came in and advancing to the Prime Minister whispered to him. Mr. Alstone started, stared, recovered himself, said a word or two in reply, and when the man had left the room turned to us.

"Here's a startling development!" he exclaimed. "The young lady you've just been talking about, Morrison, Miss Travis, is downstairs! Now, where on earth has she sprung from?"

CHAPTER XV

THE ULTIMATUM

Before I could recover from my astonishment, the man who had just disappeared, appeared again, ushering in a young lady at sight of whom we all three instinctively rose to our feet. Under the circumstances it was excusable to stare at her; I for one stared hard. And what I stared at was a remarkably pretty girl, tall, lissom, fair-haired and blue-eyed, as Mrs. Withers had said, who might have been two or three and twenty, but looked more like nineteen. She blushed under the inspection of three pairs of masculine eyes, but I saw that for all that she was self-possessed and free of embarrassment—still, there was a certain amount of pretty timidity in the way she looked from one to the other of my two companions.

"Mr. Alstone?" she said inquiringly.

The Prime Minister woke out of his momentary stupefaction and drew forward a chair to the side of his own.

"I am Mr. Alstone," he answered. "And you—Miss Travis? The Miss Travis who has recently had a cottage near Rumbelow Point?"

"Yes," she replied, looking a little surprised. "Vimiera Cottage. I—I was kidnapped from there, or from close by there, some days ago. That's why I've come to see you, Mr. Alstone; because Mr. Petherwin was kidnapped with me."

The Prime Minister glanced at the door. But the discreet person who had shown Miss Travis in had taken care to close it when he retired, and the glance shifted itself to the interesting visitor.

"You and Mr. Petherwin were kidnapped together!" exclaimed Mr. Alstone. "But—you are here! Where is Mr. Petherwin?"

The girl made a little smile of bewilderment and spread out her hands.

"But I don't know, Mr. Alstone," she answered. "I have no idea. They released me this evening and brought me to London, but I don't know from where."

"Who brought you to London?" asked Mr. Alstone.

"One of the men who carried us off," replied Miss Travis.

"How?"

"In a closed car, out of which I couldn't see anything," she replied. "I was put into it after dark, driven a long, a very long way, and set down in Trafalgar Square with orders to come straight to you."

"Orders from—Mr. Petherwin?" asked the Prime Minister.

"Oh no! From these people. I have never seen Mr. Petherwin since he and I were taken into the house in which I—and I suppose he, too—have been kept for some days. But I feel sure he is still there."

"And you have been sent—why?" inquired Mr. Alstone.

"To bring a message to you—from these people," she answered. "It was carefully given to me by the man who came with me in the car. If you wish for Mr. Petherwin's immediate release, you are to send fifty thousand pounds in Bank of England notes by some person who must be unaccompanied to the third milestone on the road between Salisbury and Amesbury at midnight on Monday—day after to-morrow."

"And if I don't?" said Mr. Alstone. "What then?"

Miss Travis shook her head.

"I—don't know!" she answered.

There was a brief silence. Then Mr. Cazalette moved his chair forward from where he had been sitting, a little in the background.

"It seems to me," he said in his direct tones, "that the first thing we should do is to have this young lady's account of the kidnapping of herself and Mr. Petherwin. We shall then be better able——"

"Just so—just so," agreed the Prime Minister. He turned to his visitor with some little show of embarrassment. "We had heard something of you, Miss Travis, before you came in—from this young

gentleman, Mr. Morrison, who is a neighbour of yours——"

She interrupted him with a nod in my direction.

"I've heard of Mr. Morrison, but I've never seen him before," she said. "You live at Cove Cottage, don't you? That's very near the place where Mr. Petherwin and I were pounced upon. Probably you were in your cottage at the time—it was all done in broad daylight!"

"Yes, yes!" said Mr. Alstone hurriedly, as if he wanted to get at a connected narrative. "We'll come to that in due course. I want to know the beginning. I hear you are an occasional resident at this place—Rumbelow Point? You really live—where?"

"I live in South Kensington," replied Miss Travis. "I have a flat of my own there—I only go down to Vimiera Cottage when I feel inclined; for a few days at a time, you know. I'd only been there a few days this time, when this affair happened."

"And Mr. Petherwin? You knew him as Mr. Petherwin—not as Mr. Peters?"

"Of course I knew him as Mr. Petherwin! Mr. Petherwin is a patron of mine—he's bought a lot of my best pictures—he first began buying them when I had a show of my own in New Bond Street, two years ago. To be sure, I knew he stayed at the Starboard Light Inn as Mr. Peters—he didn't want the people there to know who he really was. But to me, of course, he was Mr. Petherwin."

"Was it you who told him of the Starboard Light Inn?" asked the Prime Minister.

"I think I did—I told him of the charms of the scenery round about there, anyway," she answered, with a frank smile.

"And when he was down there, we hear, he spent a good deal of his time with you?"

"Why not? There was no other company for him, poor man! He liked to talk to me, and to watch me painting. Oh yes, we were a great deal together."

"Good companions, eh?" observed Mr. Alstone, smiling. "And eventually, companions in misfortune. Well, now, just tell us, Miss Travis, how this kidnapping came about."

"It came about quite suddenly," she replied. "So suddenly that it was all over before I realized what was happening—indeed, I could scarcely comprehend that it had happened—I wouldn't have believed that such a thing could have happened in England, in broad daylight. However—it did! It came about like this—I had gone out that morning intending to make a sketch of a fine old oak in a lane near Strillion Cove; I say intending, but as a matter of fact, I had begun work on my sketch when the thing happened. I was sitting on top of a high bank, sketching, when I heard cries and expostulations round a bend of the lane, close by, and suddenly I recognized Mr. Petherwin's voice. I immediately threw down my sketch-book and pencil, scrambled down the bank, and ran

up the lane. When I came to the bend, I saw Mr. Petherwin struggling with three men, or, rather, striking at them with a stout stick that he always carried. As I made towards them, one of the men closed with him, seized the stick, twisted it out of Mr. Petherwin's hands, and threw it aside; the other men seized him by his arms. I ran up, protesting. I was horribly afraid—terribly afraid. Because I had already seen that all three men were masked!"

"Masked, eh?" exclaimed Mr. Alstone. "Faces completely concealed?"

"More than their faces!" answered Miss Travis. "They were wearing hoods which entirely covered their heads and necks down to their shoulders. There were holes for the eyes, of course, but the hoods were made very loosely, and though I afterwards tried, for purposes of identification, to see the colour of their eyes, I never could. I haven't the slightest notion of the colour of eyes, hair, or anything—all I know is that all three were big, athletic men, wearing what I should consider fashionably made, well-cut tweed suits."

"Well—you went up to them?" suggested Mr. Alstone.

"I did—in spite of the fact that Mr. Petherwin, catching sight of me, shouted at me to run. Perhaps I ought to have done as he told me—I might have got help, but I was confused. I went up, begging them to leave Mr. Petherwin alone. Mr. Petherwin was so

angry that he—well, he was almost raving with anger—he seemed all the worse because I was there. Then the man who had twisted the stick out of his hands spoke—and I noticed at once that he spoke in quiet and cultured tones. 'No harm will come to Mr. Petherwin——' ''

Mr. Cazalette lifted his hand.

''Pardon me,'' he said. ''You're quite sure he used the name Petherwin?''

''Oh yes, quite sure!'' affirmed Miss Travis. '' 'No harm will come to Mr. Petherwin if he will calm himself and go quietly,' he said. 'But it is very unfortunate that you should turn up at this moment, for we shall be obliged, as things are, to take you, too!' Mr. Petherwin burst out—swearing, dreadfully, I think—again at that, and I drew back, protesting. But the man who had spoken laid his hand on my shoulder and motioned me towards the wood on the opposite side of the lane, and at the same time the men who held Mr. Petherwin pushed him in the same direction. Mr. Petherwin continued to protest loudly, and the man who had spoken, and who seemed to be the leader, spoke again. 'Mr. Petherwin,' he said, very calmly, but with a seriousness that made me shiver, 'if you are not immediately quiet, I shall put a bullet through this young lady, much as I shall regret the necessity.' And I knew that he meant it.''

''You were afraid?'' said Mr. Alstone sympathetically.

"Afraid! Oh, I should think I was afraid! I'm awfully strong, naturally, and I don't think I'd ever known what it was to be conscious of fear until then, but I was ready to drop with fright. And I think the man saw it, for he touched my arm again, and shook his head. 'No need to fear,' he said reassuringly, 'if Mr. Petherwin will take it quietly. But if not——' He paused at that, and then motioned me to go to Mr. Petherwin's side. 'Tell him to behave himself,' he said. 'Let him keep quiet, and neither you nor he will be harmed.' So I spoke to Mr. Petherwin. He was fearfully excited, and trembling with anger, but I got him calm—or calmer. All this time the men were hurrying us through the wood, away from the lane, and into a particularly lonely part of it called Malkis Bottom——"

I started at the mention of that part of the neighbourhood—started because I suddenly wondered if, when the first search had been made for Mr. Peters, any thorough examination of it had been made, and by which of the search parties. Miss Travis saw that I started, and turned to me.

"If you know Malkis Bottom, you'll know that behind the woods there, there are caves in the limestone crags," she continued. "They took us to one. I saw as soon as they forced us into it that these men or somebody had been bivouacing there—there was food and drink in plenty, and supplies of rugs. I realized then that this was some organized affair for

kidnapping Mr. Petherwin, and that I'd got to pay the penalty for dropping in on the kidnappers at the critical moment. And things being as they were, I begged Mr. Petherwin, as soon as we were in the cave, to compose himself and take things quietly—it was impossible, I said, that we could be carried off in this way, in England, for long. But I didn't believe what I said—for I knew quite well that in all probability not a soul had heard the row in the lane, that it would be hours before Mr. Petherwin was missed, and perhaps days before anybody missed me. You see," she added, with an ingenuous smile at us, "nobody knew—nobody was about."

Mr. Alstone glanced at me. I knew what he was thinking. And suddenly he leaned towards me and whispered:

"The young fisherman?"

I nodded and turned to our informant.

"Miss Travis," I said, "did no one but yourself intervene when Mr. Petherwin was attacked? No one?"

"No—no one!" she replied, looking at me wonderingly. "There was no one about—as far as I know."

"Have you seen any newspapers since this affair?" I inquired.

"Newspapers!" she exclaimed, a little ironically. "I should think not! I haven't the faintest idea of anything that's happened since I was forced into that wood!"

"You knew Mallett, a fisherman at Rumbelow Point?" I suggested.

"Mallett? Yes—a fine, handsome man," she asserted. "Yes, I know Mallett."

I gave her a steady look, watching her.

"Mallett was found shot through the heart, close to the place in the lane you've spoken of," I said. "It was concluded that he'd been murdered in attempting to rescue Mr. Peters."

She paled a little and shook her head wonderingly.

"I know nothing of that," she said. "I never saw or heard anything of Mallett at any time during these goings-on. No one came to Mr. Petherwin's assistance but myself. From the moment that I heard the first noise I never saw anybody but the three masked men."

"And afterwards?" I asked. "Did any one of the men ever leave you and Mr. Petherwin after you reached the cave?"

"One did, during the afternoon," she answered promptly. "He was away for an hour or two."

"Did you ever hear a shot during that time?" I asked.

"No—never! But you must remember that the caves in Malkis Bottom are a long way from that lane near your cottage," she replied. "I never heard anything, nor of anything. The afternoon was quite uneventful—and intensely boring, in addition to the detention. Mr. Petherwin and I talked, of course,

but he was too much upset to be interesting, and, you know, we didn't know what they were going to do with us."

"And—in the end?" asked the Prime Minister.

"In the end—that is, after it had become quite dark—dark in the cave, anyway, and dark outside—they told us we were going to be removed," replied Miss Travis. "They warned Mr. Petherwin very sternly about keeping quiet, but by that time he'd accepted the situation. They took us off through the woods again in a direction going away from Rumbelow Point—north-west, as far as I could make out—and finally we came out on a narrow road which, in that light, I couldn't recognize. There under some trees we waited for some little time—until a big, powerful closed car came along; I noticed it came from the northward. And into it we were summarily bundled."

CHAPTER XVI

WHERE?

At this point of her story, Miss Travis, who, it was easy to see, had some talent for dramatic effect, paused for a moment, eyeing her audience. I, too, took a glance at my companions. The two astute old lawyers were listening intently; it seemed to me that they were visualizing their fellow Minister in the situation which Miss Travers was describing. Mr. Alstone smiled a little.

"And so you were carried off—together?" he said quietly. "Clear away?"

"Carried off—and together—and clear away!" assented Miss Travis. "The car went straight ahead as soon as we were inside it. Two of the three men got into it with us, the third sat with the driver. As far as I could make out it was a magnificent car, a luxurious affair, electric light and all that sort of thing. And I was very thankful that it was, for we were in it—hours!"

"You were taken some distance?" suggested Mr. Alstone.

"Some? No end of distance! It was just after dark when we left the cave, and we were travelling

all through the night," replied Miss Travis. "Of course, they had the blinds drawn in the car, so that it was impossible to see out, but just before we left it, I did see, through a crack, that it was nearing dawn. An awful long journey!"

"If the blinds were drawn," said Mr. Cazalette, "you would have no chance of noticing your route, your direction?"

"I haven't the slightest notion of the direction in which we were taken," she answered. "I know—from the sound—that we passed through several towns, some small, some, I should say, of considerable size. We must have travelled a very long way, because, though the driver slowed up now and then in going through the towns, we were running at considerable speed most of the time. But as to where we were taken I haven't the faintest idea—except that it was to a town, or, probably, to the outskirts of one. But you see, as soon as we reached that, we were both blindfolded. Mr. Petherwin protested, but it was no use. Nothing in that way was any use—we'd just got to submit. Of course, there were the usual assurances—that no harm would come to us. But we'd got to do as we were told!"

"And after you were blindfolded?" asked Mr. Cazalette.

"The car stopped soon after that. As far as I could make out—I listened to everything very intently—it turned into and stopped in a courtyard.

We were hurried, still blindfolded, of course, into a house. I heard people talking round about us. I couldn't catch what was said, but I recognized one voice as a woman's. Then I felt a woman's hand on my own. Once more I was told that I was perfectly safe—this was from the woman. Then she led me up some stairs, a long way; at the head of the stairs I was taken along a corridor, very softly carpeted; finally into a room. The bandage that had been tied over my eyes was taken off. Then, of course, I saw the woman. She was a tall, well-built woman, in a black dress—and she had a hood over her face and shoulders, just like those worn by the men."

"Umph!" muttered Mr. Alstone. "Most extraordinary."

"And frightening!" said Miss Travis candidly. "I asked her once why I was brought there. She said that was a question she couldn't answer; that I was in no danger and should only suffer a temporary inconvenience; that I should have everything and anything I wanted, and that she advised me to rest. Then she went off—and I heard the door locked from the outside."

"A prisoner—in an unknown prison!" remarked Mr. Alstone. "Stranger and stranger!"

"Oh, I was certainly a prisoner—what troubled me was the question of how long I was to be imprisoned and what was happening to Mr. Petherwin. However, I took a look round my cell—the woman had

turned on the electric light. I saw at once that I was in a house as luxuriantly appointed—as far as that room went, anyway—as the car in which we had travelled. I was in a really very fine bedroom, with a bathroom opening out of it. The bedroom was beautifully furnished, and the bathroom splendidly fitted; there wasn't a thing that wasn't of the best taste. But, of course, I turned my attention to the doors and windows. The doors were locked from the outside; I couldn't open the windows in either room. And as it was still dark outside, I couldn't make out anything from the windows. Before long the woman came back with hot milk and biscuits, and again advised me to rest. When she'd gone, I drank the milk——"

"No fear of poison—or drugs?" asked Mr. Cazalette, smiling.

"I never thought of either," said Miss Travis. "No—I'd really come to believe their assurances about no harm—I'd decided by that time that they'd seized Mr. Petherwin because he's a Cabinet Minister, and that I was just paying the penalty of being in the way at the time they attacked him. And when I'd drunk the milk and nibbled a biscuit I just took the woman's advice and lay down—what's more, I went to sleep!"

"Wise and fortunate young woman!" murmured Mr. Alstone. "Excellent!"

"I slept some time, too," continued Miss Travis.

"It was broad daylight when I woke. And, of course, the first thing I did was to look out of the window. I hoped I should get some idea of our situation. But I was immediately disappointed. There was nothing that I recognized, and nothing that gave me any idea. Yet there was a good deal."

"What, now?" inquired Mr. Cazalette.

"I saw at once that the room I was in was at a considerable height from the ground. Immediately below, on the level, I got a peep of very green lawn which terminated at a high wall covered with old ivy. On the other side of the wall there was evidently the bank of a river, but from my angle I could only see a strip of it. But I could see the river—a broad one, fifty or sixty yards wide, I should think. Beyond its farther bank I saw meadows, fields, but no houses—in the near distance, anyway, though I saw some a good way off, and a church tower or two, miles away. And in the far distance, from six to eight miles off, I saw a range of hills, of a considerable height, that stood well up out of a generally flat or slightly undulating country. I recognized nothing, of course—the hills were unfamiliar to me, and they were all that I could have recognized. Do—can any of you think of where this may be?"

But none of us responded, and after a pause, Miss Travis went on.

"Well—I came to the conclusion that I was in a big house on the outskirts of some town, probably—

having in view the long distance we'd travelled during the night—in the north of England. And before the morning was over I got another idea—it was a cathedral city."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Alstone, brightening. "Now what made you think that?"

"This. The woman brought me a splendid breakfast—I always had far too much sent me at mealtimes and the cooking was perfect—and afterwards came with an armful of magazines and recent novels—no newspapers; I never saw a newspaper all the time I was there—and after that I was left to myself. Of course, it was horribly silent up in that room—I heard no sounds from within the house—nobody going along the corridor—nothing. But although the windows in both bedroom and bathroom were fastened in such a way that I couldn't open them—and I assure you I tried—all these had patent ventilators in the top panes, and I could hear sounds from without. And all the morning I heard the striking of a very loud, deep-toned clock from some building which was certainly not far away. It struck its chimes every quarter of an hour—the sounds seemed to come from high up in the air. And at twelve o'clock, noon, when the chimes had finished, the clock began to play tunes—and that's the only clue I've got as to where we were imprisoned, and where, I suppose, poor Mr. Petherwin is still locked up."

"Yes—yes!" exclaimed Mr. Alstone eagerly. "And—the clue?"

"Every day, at twelve o'clock, and again at six, the cathedral clock—if it was a cathedral—played tunes, and one in particular imprinted itself upon me, because I thought it such a funny thing that a cathedral clock should play that tune, and play it so merrily. That was the 'March of the Men of Harlech.' I got to anticipate that and to listen for its coming. Every day—twice a day. So now you know all I can tell you about our whereabouts—it was in a big house, on the bank of a wide river, open country in front, with a range of hills in the background, and near the house a cathedral—or it may have been a town hall—from the tower of which a carillon played the 'Men of Harlech.'"

"That can be identified—in time," said I quickly. "But—it will take time."

"Ay, Morrison—and time is valuable, and short!" remarked Mr. Alstone. He turned again to Miss Travis. "Well—and eventually you were released? Now let us hear about that."

"I've already told you about it, Mr. Alstone," she answered. "That was this evening—unexpectedly. I was blindfolded again, taken down, put in the car, and driven off—with just one of the men, still hooded, as companion. He——"

"Wait a moment," interrupted Mr. Alstone.

"These men—can you tell us what sort of men they were—what class, for instance?"

"I should say—what you commonly call gentlemen," replied Miss Travis. "They spoke—what little they did speak—like gentlemen. The man who brought me in the car to London had all the manners of a gentleman. He was very polite and considerate—but as regards what he ordered me to tell, as hard and firm as could be—implacable, you know."

"He dictated these terms to you in the car, as you came?"

"Yes—just as I have told them to you. You—if you wish for Mr. Petherwin's release—are to send the money demanded by a special messenger who is to be at the third milestone between Salisbury and Amesbury at midnight on Monday and who must be absolutely alone; if he goes with even one companion the deal is off. Your messenger, on arriving at this place, will neither hear nor see anyone until he is approached; he won't be approached unless these people see that you are keeping faith. That's all."

"And do I understand that Mr. Petherwin will then be released?" asked Mr. Alstone.

"Oh yes, I suppose so!" replied Miss Travis. "At once, I think."

"That argues that they will have Petherwin somewhere about," remarked Mr. Alstone, turning to his colleague. "And why this particular place—the

third milestone on the road from Salisbury to Amesbury?"

"I have been wondering," observed Mr. Cazalette, "if the cathedral town in which Miss Travis believes herself to have been detained is Salisbury—especially as these people specifically refer to it in their demand?"

"I know Salisbury very well indeed, sir," said I. "The town Miss Travis describes is not Salisbury. To begin with, a fast car would cover the distance between Rumbelow Point, on the Wessex coast, and Salisbury in an hour and a half, comfortably. Again, the River Avon at Salisbury is not of the width spoken of by Miss Travis. Further, there are no hills of a considerable height to be seen from Salisbury. And—most conclusive of all—no tunes are played from the tower of Salisbury Cathedral!"

"That rules out Salisbury, then," said Mr. Alstone. "But I am still wondering why that particular place, near Salisbury, is fixed upon as a rendezvous. However, between now and Monday there is time to reflect and to—um! Young lady," he went on, turning to Miss Travis, "you appear to have behaved very well in these trying circumstances, and I hope you're not feeling any ill-effects—now, no doubt, you will like to go to your own house and rest—leave us your address. Morrison," he concluded, as Miss Travis began to search her vanity bag

for a card, "you will perhaps escort Miss Travis home—and come to see me again, Morrison, at twelve o'clock, sharp, on Monday."

I took Miss Travis away from Downing Street and offered to drive her to her flat. She shook her head decisively.

"No, thank you," she answered. "After having been cooped up in one room for all these days and nights it's a perfect luxury to walk—if you don't mind?"

I didn't mind—I wanted to talk to her and to learn more from her. And as we walked away I told her of all that had gone on; of things that she didn't know, especially with relation to the murder of Mallett.

"You're sure that Mallett didn't come on the scene where Mr. Petherwin was first attacked?" I asked her. "You don't think he'd come there and been shot before you ran up the lane?"

"That's impossible," she answered. "I was so close that I should have heard the shot. Besides, Mr. Petherwin would have told me—or talked freely about the whole thing in the cave, during the afternoon."

"With no restriction?" I asked.

"There was no restriction on our tongues," she replied. "The men left us to ourselves. They gave us food—they had plenty of food with them—and offered us wine or spirits—Mr. Petherwin had whisky and soda. The men themselves spent the afternoon

outside the cave—as if on guard. As I told you all in Mr. Alstone's room, one of them went away for a while—for some time, in fact."

"Probably, then, it was he who shot Mallett," I said. "They must have met, and possibly fought. You don't know if one of the men had light chestnut coloured hair, I suppose?"

"I don't know the colour of the hair of any one of them," she answered. "We never saw them without their hoods. What I know about them is that they are a clever and determined gang. What do you think Mr. Alstone will do?"

"You might as well ask the Sphinx to speak—and to talk English in doing so!" I exclaimed. "I haven't the faintest idea. But I think we'll have determined something by Monday. Something, perhaps, totally unexpected."

Then, seeing her safe to her own door, I hurried off to the hotel whereat I was to meet Steppe. Steppe had gone to bed and was sound asleep. But he had left his door open, and I showed no compunction in rousing him from his slumbers.

CHAPTER XVII

SURRENDER

Steppe, sitting up in his bed and smoking one cigarette after another from a box that he had put handy on the stand by his side, listened to my story with avidity. He said next to nothing while I talked, and what he did say was more in the nature of an occasional grunt than an audible comment. But when I had finished he burst into a sudden, almost excited activity.

"Morrison!" he exclaimed, flinging his cigarette away, and beating one fist on the other. "Lay you anything you like I know what this affair is! It's a newspaper stunt! It's—but never mind!"

"What do you mean?" I demanded. "Newspaper stunt?"

"I say—never mind—for the present! But—lay you anything on that, too—you'll see Alstone will give way. Those chaps will get their money. It's a big thing—cleverly contrived. But—I'm going to find the man who shot Mallett! That's—flat!" He smote his fists together again and looked fiercely determined. "Of course," he added, "he was one of those masquerading fellows!"

"According to Miss Travis's story, Mallett never appeared on the scene," said I. "He doesn't come into her account."

"Maybe! But Miss Travis told you that one of the men was away for some time during the afternoon. That's when Mallett was shot. Morrison—I'm beginning to see lots of things. Those chaps had an accomplice in the neighbourhood. When the man was away from the cave in the afternoon, he went to meet that accomplice. Probably it was the accomplice who, later on, took a shot at you. See that?"

"A lot of supposition in all that, Steppe," I said.

"Very likely," he admitted, with a cynical laugh. "And a fat lot of good one would do and a lot one would effect if one—didn't suppose in these cases! I'm supposing, and I'm going to suppose a lot—and I'll bet I'll work through to a satisfactory solution. We've got one fine clue, anyway."

"What clue?" I asked.

"Those chimes—bells—clock—carillon—whatever they call it!" he answered. "'Men of Harlech' at twelve o'clock noon, six o'clock evening. That can be traced!"

"Pretty stiff job, that, I think," said I doubtingly. "There are no end of cities and towns in the country where chimes are played at stated hours."

"The thing can be done!" he said doggedly. "It's a question of time——"

"Of course it could be done, in time," I admitted,

"and by the time you were successful, the fellows would be off."

"Well, never mind!" he retorted. "It is a clue—and a good one. And if the thing's what I believe it to be, the men in it will not be off. They'll be out and about and we shall pass them in Piccadilly and rub shoulders against them in the Strand—and not know them! Deep conspiracy, my boy—and now I'm going to sleep again, and I'd advise you to do the same. Not another word, Morrison—I'll likely have a new idea at breakfast."

I left him and went to bed. Next morning was Sunday, and I intended, having had a hard week of it, to get up late. But Steppe was into my room, wide awake and evidently full of notions, at eight o'clock. He had a paper-covered book in his hand and waved it at me.

"Morrison," he exclaimed, "Sunday is a nuisance about telegrams, but I've been wading through this Post-Office Guide, and I find that by sending off a wire from the nearest branch office when it's open this morning, it'll be delivered at Rumbelow Point first thing to-morrow, which is the best thing you can do, Sundays, when there's no country post."

"To whom do you want to wire at Rumbelow Point?" I asked.

"Munro, to be sure!" he answered. "He's on the spot—at least, I hope he is, and I don't suppose he and Miss Petherwin left last night."

"But what about?" I inquired.

"Good Heavens! You must be half asleep!" he exclaimed. "Why, man, to get him to go and examine that cave, of course! He may get some clue there—those fellows may have left something about. Now, I don't know exactly where that cave is—pull your wits together and give me an accurate account of its locality, so that I can wire it to Munro. Come on, now—I want to get this thing going!"

I gave him the necessary information and he wrote out his message there and then, reading it out to me when finished.

"I'll sign it with your name and give the address of this hotel," he said. "He won't know my name. Now, I'll go round to the telegraph office and send this off, and by the time I'm back, Morrison, you'll be pleased to be down to breakfast, and that over, we'll go and see this Miss Travis."

"Why?" I asked. "What do you want with Miss Travis?"

"To hand her her sketch-book," he answered, tapping his big pocket. "And—much more important—to ask her a question which you, my son, and your two high-and-mighty companions of last night never had the sense to ask her, according to your account of the proceedings!"

"What question?" I demanded.

"Wait till you take me to see her," he answered. "You'll hear it then, right enough, and you'll feel

inclined to punch your own head for not having thought of it! Now tumble out!"

Steppe was one of those naturally persistent people who give nobody any peace until they themselves have got what they happen to want, and he gave me none until I had conducted him to Miss Elisia Travis's flat. It was by that time eleven o'clock—a strange hour at which to call on a young lady, but then, as Steppe remarked, the circumstances were strange. Miss Travis, however, who was discovered at breakfast with a girl friend, to whom, I shrewdly suspect, she was retailing her romantic adventures under a pledge of strict secrecy, appeared to see nothing strange in our advent, and she was evidently glad to get her lost sketch-book. I explained Steppe's connection with the affair, in introducing him—thereafter Steppe took matters into his own hands in his own characteristic fashion. Carefully foisting me on the girl friend, he manœuvred Miss Travis into a corner of her studio, where for the next three-quarters of an hour I had the pleasure of watching them engage in what was evidently a highly confidential conversation. But it was another of Steppe's characteristics that he never wasted time on words, and as soon as he had got all he wanted out of his hostess, he dragged me off again.

"Morrison," he said in a confidential whisper as soon as we had reached the street, "you know that both Alstone, now Prime Minister, and Cazalette, now

Home Secretary, were big pots at the Bar before they attained their present eminence in politics? Well, by gad, I've heard that they both had a reputation for examining and cross-examining in those days, but hanged if I know how they got it, considering the very poor way they—and you, too, my son—questioned that girl last night! Why, you never asked her, any of you, the one question that's really of immense importance in the affair!"

"I'm quite sure you did, though," I retorted. "And, now, what may that question be, pray?"

"Why, you ass, this," he answered. "The Budget? What about the Budget? That, of course, is *the* question! You see, it's been well known in City and financial circles for some time that Petherwin was going to bring in a Budget of great importance, containing most drastic and probably upsetting fiscal changes—there's been intense curiosity and even anxiety amongst foreign financiers to learn the provisions. And when Petherwin, as Mr. Peters, the geologist and fossil-hunter, went down to Rumbelow Point, the Budget so feverishly awaited all over Europe, and, I believe, to some extent in both North and South America, was just about due."

"Well?" I asked.

"Well, Petherwin, of course, would have that Budget in his pocket—you bet! It was his secret. I don't suppose any of his Cabinet colleagues knew everything about it, though they would have a gen-

eral notion, and Alstone, to be sure, would have a particular one. But—Petherwin would have it on him. It wouldn't be a bulky document—it might be on quite a small amount of paper—Lord Randolph Churchill, I believe, got the provisions of his famous Budget—never brought out—on a single sheet. But, I repeat—it would be on Petherwin when, as Peters, he went to the Starboard Light."

"Again—well?" I inquired.

"Why, of course, what I should have thought you'd have asked this girl at once would be—did she know anything about it?" he answered. "That's what I wanted to know this morning. And now—I know. Of course, it explains everything. Those fellows, whoever they are, were after the Budget! And I imagine that they've been in possession of it for several days—perhaps from the day on which they got Petherwin into the mysterious house we've heard of."

"Has she told you that?" I asked.

"She doesn't know. From the moment she and Petherwin were taken into that house, blindfolded, she never saw or heard Petherwin. But she knows that Petherwin had his Budget about him. I gather that he and this girl were extraordinarily thick—she seems to regard him as a sort of ex-officio uncle, or guardian, or something of that sort—and that he gave her a good deal of his confidence, even about political affairs. Well, she says that when he and she were prisoners in that cave together, their captors sitting

outside, Petherwin told her that he had his Budget in his possession, in a secret pocket in his clothes, and that he was not greatly afraid of their assailants discovering it, for a great deal of it was in a sort of hieroglyphic writing only understood by himself. So —there you are! Of course, these chaps have got it, and—that's where Petherwin would be mistaken—they'll have made out its general tenor, hieroglyphics or not! And that confirms me in my belief that this is a newspaper stunt!"

"That means that it's something carried out in the interests of a paper," I said. "I think you're wrong, Steppe! The Mallett affair——"

"Don't you get under the impression that I think it's an English newspaper stunt!" he interrupted with emphasis. "No—no—foreign elements! And—I haven't forgotten Sherman and his lot! This afternoon and evening I'm going to frequent certain circles in which I may pick up a little information concerning those gentlemen."

He left me, on this mission, after we had lunched together, and for the rest of that Sunday I saw nothing of him. Nor did I see him on the Monday morning before I went to Downing Street. I turned in there punctually to the minute at twelve o'clock. As I approached No. 10 I saw Rutherford come out of its door and go across the street towards the Foreign Office, and I wondered if he had been in consultation with Mr. Alstone.

The Prime Minister was alone when I was admitted to him, and he looked much graver than when I had taken Miss Travis away on the Saturday night. He silently motioned me to a seat near his own.

"Morrison," he said, in low confidential tones, "you have been a great deal behind the scenes in this affair, and I see every reason to trust you. Since you were here on Saturday evening and heard Miss Travis's story there is a new development. I received this morning a letter, posted here in London, which has evidently come from Mr. Petherwin's captors and supplements Miss Travis's account of them and their demands. They threaten that unless those demands are complied with to-night, according to the instructions she gave us, the full particulars of the Government's fiscal policy, as set forth in Mr. Petherwin's Budget, of which they have undoubtedly possessed themselves, will be supplied to the European—indeed, to the world Press! That—you start!"

I explained Steppe's theory. He looked interested—and harassed.

"We cannot allow this to get out!" he said. "The revelation of our proposed fiscal policy at present would mean—but never mind that; it is scarcely for you. The fact is, Morrison, undignified as it may sound, we shall have to give way to these people, whoever they are!"

"To—to comply with their demand, sir!" I exclaimed.

"It is a large amount," he said, seeming and perhaps affecting to misunderstand me, "but a mere nothing in comparison with—but that, again, I need not go into. The fact is, Morrison, the affair, at whatever cost, must be terminated at once, and with the greatest secrecy. I have wired to Miss Petherwin that we have news of her brother and begging her to return to town at once—I only hope she has not continued to talk to everybody down there as she talked to you on Saturday—a most annoying woman! We want—silence!"

"There is the question of the murdered man, sir," I suggested.

"True, true!" he said hastily. "But—it is not certain, you know, that—eh? Perhaps that affair is quite distinct from Petherwin's business."

"Mallett's sister, sir, is determined to get at the truth," I said. "And——"

"I know—I know!" he interrupted. "Perhaps a satisfactory compensation to the young woman? But, again, that is not immediately before us. The thing is to get done with this before there is widespread publicity, and to prevent these people from carrying out their threat. I have just ascertained from Mr. Rutherford that Mr. Petherwin when he went down to this place—Rumbelow—had in his pocket a précis—made by himself, of course—of his Budget particulars——"

"I know that, sir," I said. "Mr. Petherwin told

Miss Travis that he had it in his pocket when he and she were in the cave of which she told us the other night. But I understand that the particulars were in a sort of shorthand only understood by Mr. Petherwin himself."

He shook his head at that.

"Oh, you may be sure these men would overcome that difficulty!" he said. "They are doubtless very clever and crafty, and I think their plans must have been carefully laid. Well, as I said, it seems to me that we can do nothing but accede to their terms, for Petherwin must be released and his fiscal policy kept secret. And I want you, Morrison, as you have already done so much, to do more—I want you to act as go-between!"

CHAPTER XVIII

LASSITER AGAIN

I dare say I started—involuntarily—at this unexpected suggestion; probably I had in my mind a recollection of the fact that some of the gang I was now asked to deal with had shot at me in my own garden: whether to kill me outright or merely to terrorize me into non-interference, I didn't know. I suppose I hesitated—Mr. Alstone laid a hand on my shoulder.

"I want somebody that I can trust!" he said. "Also, I gathered from a remark of yours when we were talking to Miss Travis on Saturday night that you know Salisbury and the district. That's an advantage."

"I know the district, sir," I answered. "Of course, I shall have to go there alone. That, I believe, is a stipulation?"

"Strict—on their part!" he asserted. "But I don't suppose you'll come away alone. There will be —Mr. Petherwin. The conditions, as I understand them, are that as soon as this—we'd better call it by its true name, ransom!—as soon as this ransom is handed over, Mr. Petherwin is to be forthcoming.

In fact, handed over to you in exchange. He will no doubt be upset—I want you to bring him to town immediately, or, at any rate, first thing next morning; he may, perhaps, wish to rest for a few hours at a Salisbury hotel."

"What exact arrangements do you propose, sir?" I asked.

"Well, I think you had better be provided with a car—a private car—and go down in it in good time to-night, leaving it as near this appointed place of rendezvous as you think wise," he answered. "Then——"

"Pardon me, sir," I said, interrupting him, "but I don't think that will do at all. These people insist on a particular kind of secrecy, and I've no doubt that they are keeping watch on us here—they're clever enough! As I understand it, all they demand is that your representative should be at the third milestone on the highroad between Salisbury and Amesbury at exactly midnight to-night, and should there hand over to them what they ask for. If you'll leave it to me—as you wish me to go—I'll make my own arrangements. I know precisely what to do—which is, to meet these people in strict secrecy at the appointed time and place, and I'd rather do it in my own way."

"Good!—good!" he said, with a gesture which indicated that he was only too glad to have the matter taken out of his hands. "Then—I leave it to you

—entirely to you, Morrison. The only thing to do now is to give you—this."

He turned to his desk, pulled open a drawer, and produced a somewhat bulky package enclosed in an envelope of stout cartridge paper, on the flap of which was a big splash of red wax. He made a grimace as he hurried it into my hand.

"There!—there!" he said. "That's what these people want. Very well, Morrison, that's all. I trust everything to you."

I went away with the bulky package in my inner breast-pocket. Before I had got down to the street door I had decided what to do. Without any delay, waiting to see Steppe, or anything of that sort, I would go straight to Salisbury and lie snug in the hotel I had fixed on there until the time came for action—for I knew what I had on me, and I did not know who might not know that I had it. Perhaps this knowledge made me extra sharp-eyed when I emerged into Downing Street; anyway, I took stock, in lynx-like fashion, of everything about me as I walked away from the door of No. 10. And the first thing I saw was the familiar face and figure of Lassiter, who was coming over in my direction from the corner of the Colonial Office.

Lassiter caught sight of me in that same instant, and came up with his usual obsequious air; he was an essentially polite person. I thought he looked ill, and I stopped.

"Sorry to see you not looking very well, Lassiter," I said. "What's the matter?"

"I am not well, sir," he replied, shaking his head, not exactly dolefully, but with a sort of mournful conviction. "I have not been well for some days—I have been greatly upset, sir, by recent events—nerves, sir. The—the waiting for news, sir, has been very prejudicial in my case. You see, sir, my master's establishment is not a large one—in fact, I have it pretty well to myself, and——"

I nodded at No. 11, the Chancellor's official residence.

"Do you mean it's not a big establishment, then?" I asked.

"Oh, dear me, no, sir," he replied, with a deprecating smile. "I know nothing whatever about that place—that, sir, is, of course, the home associated with my master's high position!—no, sir, I was referring to our own place—Mr. Petherwin's private residence; a flat in Piccadilly, sir, where we have but a small staff, no member of which, sir, is competent to discuss these events. I assure you, sir, the waiting for news, the indecision, sir, the never knowing what you mayn't hear next, sir, is becoming too much for me, and I am just now on my way to see Mr. Rutherford, and to inform him that I must take a few days' change—I suppose you have not heard any definite news in your part of the world, sir?"

I hesitated before replying: I was thinking, for there was a new feature in my relations with Lassiter. In all my previous talk with him he had scrupulously kept to the Mr. Peters' theory; never once had he said, or inferred, nor admitted that Mr. Peters was in reality the Right Honourable Charles Petherwin, Chancellor of the Exchequer; now he spoke of him as such boldly and openly.

"So you are aware that I know Mr. Peters to be Mr. Petherwin, Lassiter?" I said suddenly. "You haven't referred to him as Mr. Petherwin before!"

He gave me a sort of half-mournful, half-quizzical smile, shaking his head.

"I do not think it is much good keeping up that pretence any longer, sir," he answered. "I have no doubt that you have known Mr. Peters to be Mr. Petherwin for some time—so do many other people, too, sir. Perhaps, sir, you have not noticed or had your attention drawn to this?"

He drew from his side pocket a neatly folded copy of a highly popular morning newspaper, famous for its provision of sensational news and staring headlines, and pointed to a line that was right across the front page in huge black capitals:

"WHO IS MR. PETERS—REALLY?"

"As I say, sir, I don't know if you have seen that," he continued, putting the paper into my hands. "I

read it first thing this morning. The thing, sir, is getting out—it is no secret: to some people, at any rate."

There were several lines of big, leaded type under the staring headline. But there was nothing definite in them; it was all hint, suggestion, innuendo. Still, suspicion was afoot.

"I do not know where all that can have emanated from, sir," remarked Lassiter. "I have given no information to the Press. I think, sir, it has been derived from the neighbourhood of Rumbelow Point—or, possibly, from Miss Petherwin. Indeed, sir, from my knowledge of Miss Petherwin, and from what she said when she came to town the other day, I do not know, sir, how the matter can remain secret any longer. Miss Petherwin, sir, when I saw her, announced her determination of giving the widest publicity to the whole thing. And Miss Petherwin is a lady of character, sir, a very resolute lady, as indeed she should be, having, I understand, been engaged in what they call the Higher Education for many years. But you may, perhaps, have encountered Miss Petherwin in your vicinity, sir?—I know she was going down there."

I don't know if Lassiter was fishing for information; perhaps not—he was a reserved man himself and doubtless understood reserve in other people. Anyway, I was not going to give him any.

"I have been away from home a good deal lately,

Lassiter," I answered evasively. "But look here!—now that you admit Mr. Peters to be Mr. Petherwin, I'd like you to tell me something which you doubtless can tell me. Mr. Petherwin, masquerading as, or rather purporting to be, Mr. Peters, had paid two or three visits to the Starboard Light Inn——"

"Three, sir—three previous visits," he interrupted. "This, sir, was the fourth."

"Well, three visits before this last one—the fourth," I continued. "Now, was there anybody in that neighbourhood who, to your knowledge, knew that Mr. Peters was really Mr. Petherwin, the Chancellor of the Exchequer?"

He smiled, in his curious, melancholy fashion, and gave me a sly look.

"May I ask you a question, sir?" he replied. "A pertinent question!"

"You may, Lassiter," said I.

"Well, sir," he continued, still smiling, "I am an observant person, and as I came round the corner there, I saw you leaving the Prime Minister's official residence. Do I take it, sir, that you are in some way concerned in the search for Mr. Petherwin?" Then, seeing my hesitation, he added quietly: "I am, of course, a person of strict honour, sir—anything you please to tell me I shall hold sacred."

"Then you may take it that I am concerned, Lassiter," I replied. "Will that do?"

"That will do very well, sir, thank you," he said.

"And I have no objection, knowing that, to answering your question. Yes, sir—there were two people in the neighbourhood of Rumbelow Point who knew that the Mr. Peters of the Starboard Light Inn was really the Right Honourable Charles Petherwin, M.P., Chancellor of the Exchequer—oh yes, sir!"

"Two, eh?" said I. "And—who were they?"

"Well, sir, one was a charming member of the opposite sex," he replied, smiling archly. "A young lady artist, Miss Travis, a good deal of whose work ornaments the walls of my master's private residence. Mr. Petherwin, sir, is a great patron of art, and has a belief in Miss Travis—he has often assured me that Miss Travis will make a considerable figure in her own line. Now Miss Travis, sir, has a little seaside place, Vimiera Cottage, near your way, and she has generally—three out of four times, at any rate—been at it when Mr. Petherwin has been at the Starboard Light. Naturally, sir, he has visited Miss Travis at her cottage. I think, sir, you may remember that on the evening on which I had the honour of first seeing you, at the inn, you and I met later—in fact, collided—near your own residence? Well, sir, you may have wondered what I was doing down there at that late hour? The fact was, sir, I was on my way to Miss Travis's place, bearing a note to her from my master—to let her know we had arrived."

"I see," said I, remembering well enough what he

meant. "And—you found her there that night?"

"Oh, certainly, sir, and gave her the note, and stayed a little while chatting with her—she gave me a little refreshment, sir, and presented me with a cigar," he answered, still smilingly. "And the next day, when, as you will remember, sir, I sought all round the neighbourhood for Mr. Petherwin, naturally I called at Vimiera Cottage to ascertain if he had been there—indeed, I fully expected to find him there. But I found no one there—the place was locked up."

"Have you ever seen Miss Travis since?" I asked.

"I have not, sir," he answered. "Three days ago I called at Miss Travis's studio, here in town. That, too, was locked up."

"Lassiter," said I, "did it ever occur to you that your master had eloped with Miss Travis?"

He shook his head gravely.

"The notion, sir, may have come into what I understand is called the sub-conscious mind," he replied. "But—only to be dismissed, sir, as untenable. To begin with, sir, Mr. Petherwin was just about to bring in his first Budget—a most important one, I fancy. To end with, sir, if Mr. Petherwin had matrimonial intentions towards Miss Travis, there was no need for elopement. No, sir—I think the relations between Miss Travis and my master were of the purely Platonic variety."

"Well," I said, "and who was the other person

down there who knew that Mr. Peters was Mr. Petherwin?"

He answered that question promptly, as if it had been one which admitted but of one reply.

"Mr. Sherman, the Member of Parliament, sir, who has a country place not far from you—Brockensdene Grange," he said. "That, of course, was unavoidable—once Mr. Sherman and Mr. Petherwin chanced to meet down there."

"Then they did meet?" I suggested.

"The second visit he paid there, I think, sir," asserted Lassiter. "Oh yes, I remember my master returning one afternoon to the Starboard Light and telling me he'd met Mr. Sherman. I think that was during our second visit—it may have been the third. At any rate, whenever it was, Mr. Petherwin went to Brockensdene Grange next day to lunch with Mr. Sherman."

I went off after that—Lassiter's last bit of information had given me enough food for reflection for the time being. So Sherman had met Petherwin down there, had he—and had entertained him at Brockensdene Grange? That roused all sorts of speculations, doubts, theories—it was puzzling, more than puzzling: it would have to be gone into. Meanwhile . . . there was the business in hand, and the packet in my pocket.

I took good care to keep my jacket tightly buttoned at Waterloo, and to go down to Salisbury in a care-

fully chosen third-class carriage in which I had plenty of company. Arrived at Salisbury I walked straight to the White Hart Hotel, with which I was familiar, and out of its doors never emerged again until it was necessary to set out on my journey to the appointed place of meeting. But during the evening I made all my arrangements with great care. I engaged two rooms—one for myself, one for Mr. Petherwin. I took counsel with the night-porter, explaining to him that I had to go out at half-past eleven, and should return at half-past twelve with a friend. Further, I got him to commission me a private car, the driver of which was to be a trusty person whom I should reward well. All that done, I dined quietly, spent the rest of the evening over a book in the lounge, and tried not to think of the somewhat doubtful experience before me—for, after all, there might be danger in the thing. Eventually, eleven-thirty came, and stepping into the car awaiting me, I bade its driver follow the Amesbury Road until I told him to stop.

CHAPTER XIX

BRIGHT CHESTNUT!

Everything was very still and the night was very dark when I pulled up my driver and got out of his car a little short of the third milestone on the road that leads from Salisbury to Amesbury. I knew that neighbourhood pretty well, and I purposely stopped at a place where the car could wait by the roadside, under the protecting shadows of a grove of trees, until such time as I wanted it again. Bidding the driver turn down or shade his lights and explaining to him that I might be back with him almost immediately, or possibly not for half an hour, I went forward to the place of rendezvous. I had timed things excellently; it was precisely two minutes to twelve when I reached the milestone.

There was a silence like to that of the grave at that spot. Standing in the middle of the wide road, my figure, no doubt, distinct enough against the starlight, I waited, listening intently for the sound of approaching footsteps. I heard nothing of that sort—all I heard was the gentle sighing of a westerly wind blowing across the plain and rustling in the adjacent hedge-rows. It was my opinion that the ambassador

with whom I was to do my business would come as I had come, in a car, and I strained my ears to catch sounds of its advent. But the minutes dragged by and no sound came; up there, in those vast solitudes (for this was before the War, and Salisbury Plain was innocent of the huge camps, barracks, and aerodromes that have since encumbered it) I seemed to be the only waking thing in a world of sleep. But after a time I began to wonder if the man I was to meet was already there, and if I was being watched. There was ample cover all about me; a man might be hidden amongst those trees, or behind that hedge—watching, to assure himself that I was really alone. That idea made me listen more intently than ever, for the rustle of a leaf, the snapping of a twig. But I heard nothing that signalled the nearness or approach of anything human, and the silence grew trying; it was with positive relief that I heard, far away behind me, the scream of a railway train ploughing east or west on its midnight journey.

Ten minutes passed; fifteen; twenty. I marched up and down in the middle of the road, always listening. I was becoming puzzled; the instructions of these people had been precise. I was at the right place, and at the right time, and unaccompanied. Clearly, something had gone wrong with them—but what was I to do?—and what would be the effect of the failure to meet on the unfortunate Chancellor? It was out of the question that I could wait there all

through the night—and at the end of half an hour I walked slowly back to my car. Its driver, whom I had taken into my confidence so far as to tell him that I had gone up there to keep an appointment, was smoking his pipe in unconcerned patience.

"The man I expected has not turned up," said I. "I scarcely know whether to wait longer or not."

"How might he be coming, sir?" asked the driver.

"I should say by car," I replied. "And most likely down the road."

"No signs of him now, then," he answered. "That is, at this moment. You can hear a car miles off at this time o' night."

I got out my pipe and tobacco and began to smoke, walking up and down at the side of the car. Another five or ten minutes passed; I was thinking of going back to the milestone when a sudden exclamation from my driver aroused me.

"Hullo!" he said, pointing up the road in the Amesbury direction. "Here's a light coming along. That'll be a bicycle. Maybe it's your friend, sir——"

I went forward at that, keeping myself in the centre of the road. The light was some distance off, but it was advancing rapidly; at last I heard the faint whir of rubber-shod wheels. And as I came abreast of the milestone the bicycle and its rider shot clear of the darkness—the head-lamp threw its light full on me, purposely standing in the way. I saw

then that the rider was a policeman, and though I scarcely knew why I did it, I lifted my hand.

"Hi!—stop!" I called.

He was off his machine at once, staring from me towards the car, the lights of which he could see well enough.

"Are you a doctor, sir?" he demanded hurriedly.

"A doctor? No!" said I. "Why——"

"Thought you might be, being out late," he answered. "There's a bad accident up the road—young gentleman thrown off his motor-bicycle. I'm afraid it's all up with him—I've got him into a wayside cottage, and I'm going for a doctor, though I don't think it's any good. Broken down, sir?" he added, nodding at my car.

"No," I replied. "I came up here to meet a man. It may be he's the man you're talking about. Where's he lying?"

He was preparing to remount his machine, but paused at that.

"About a mile and a half along here, in a cottage—you'll see lights in the windows, close to the road. If you think he's somebody you know, perhaps you'll go on and see him—I'll get along for a doctor."

"One moment," said I. "How did it happen?—what was he doing?"

"Going too fast, I should say," he answered. "I didn't see it, but I heard him. Tore past my place at a furious speed, close on twelve o'clock,

and came to grief at a bend a bit further on—dashed into a stout wall. There were people awake near—I was fetched. Well—you'll go up there, sir?"

"At once," I asserted. "But—you think a doctor's not much good? Likely to—die, eh? Then, if I were you, I should bring your inspector of superintendent back—don't you think?"

I had a purpose in that suggestion. If this man turned out to be the man I had come to meet, and if he died, I foresaw complications for myself: the presence of men in authority were desirable: I might be obliged to take some official or other into my confidence. The policeman acquiesced; he appeared to be certain of the man's fate, and muttered something about an inquest as he jumped on his bicycle and made speed towards Salisbury. And as he vanished I hurried to the car, and bade the driver go along the road till he came to a wayside cottage in which he would see the windows lighted.

We were at that cottage in five minutes. Its door was open; a man, evidently a farm-labourer, came to it as I jumped from the car and made in. He shook his head at sight of me.

"Too late, doctor," he said quickly. "He's gone. Died just after the policeman set off to fetch you."

I advanced into the light; he saw his mistake then, and drew back, staring.

"I am not a doctor," said I. "The policeman met

me on the road and told me what had happened. I came on to see if I could do anything. You say he's dead?"

"Died as soon as the policeman had gone, sir," replied a woman who had come up from within. "Come inside, sir; we've done what we could, but of course——"

There were one or two other folk within the cottage—neighbours who had evidently been roused from their sleep and had dressed hurriedly. They made way for me as I entered, directing my attention to a large, old-fashioned couch which filled one side of the little living-room.

"Never came to himself, sir," whispered the woman. "Stunned he was when they carried him, and remained so till he went."

I bent over the dead man, who lay as they had set him down. He was in his overalls, and still wore a sort of helmet-cap. But from beneath it, at his temples and behind his ears, there was plenty of his crisp hair showing—and it was of a bright chestnut colour. I had seen hair of that sort and tint not long before—in the grasp of another dead man's fingers, and I had little doubt that here, in this Wiltshire wayside cottage, killed himself by misadventure, lay the man who had murdered Jim Mallett.

I took a long look at the dead man's face. He seemed to be, say, twenty-five years of age—thereabouts: of good features, but with a certain sugges-

tion of brutality about them which was heightened by the injuries plainly visible on temple and cheek-bone. Not a prepossessing young man, and yet I could see, from certain small evidences, that he was what is commonly called a gentleman. A fine, athletic, strongly built young animal—and as dead as a door-nail. And his death was all due to his own foolhardiness, as I presently ascertained. The man of the cottage took me out to the scene of the accident, close by: another man, a neighbour, went with us, who, he told me, had been sitting up with a sick child when the thing happened and had hurried out. This man said that he heard the motor-bicycle coming along from the northward at a tremendous rate; he had gone to the window and seen it flash past, faster, he declared, than an express train, and had then waited in sure expectation of hearing a smash. For a little way past his cottage there was a right-angled turn in the road; nobody riding at that rate, he said, could possibly get round it in safety. And presently, he had heard what he expected to hear and had rushed out, calling the man in the neighbouring cottage, and they had found —what I had just seen.

I was, of course, absolutely certain by this time that the dead man was the man I had come to meet—there could be no doubt about it. I waited for the policeman to return with help, wondering all the time what I had better do. It was half-past one o'clock

in the morning before he returned, but he brought plenty of company with him: two medical men in one car; the superintendent of police, an inspector, and a sergeant in another. Evidently the policeman had explained to the superintendent that I was a person met by chance who had gone up there to meet some other person—probably the dead man. The superintendent eyed me with curiosity—but before questioning me he and his assistants made a thorough examination of the dead man's clothing and belongings. They made no objection to my presence, and I watched all they did with great curiosity, eager to see if they found anything by which the man could be identified.

They found nothing—of that sort. There were no papers. There were no initials on the linen; no tabs sewn inside the clothes showing their owner's name and address. There was plenty of money—twelve or fifteen pounds in gold and silver—in the pockets; and a first-rate watch and chain; various little articles, such as a handsome gold cigarette-case and a gold match-box, came to light. But there was nothing whatever that showed who the man was, whence he came, whither he was bound. One find, drawn from the deep pocket of his overall clothes, bewildered the police, but it gave me no astonishment: it was a hood, to fit the head and shoulders, and exactly of the sort described at the Prime Minister's by Miss Travis.

The police-superintendent turned to me when all this had been gone through. He looked me carefully over as if not quite certain of the situation.

"The constable," he remarked, nodding towards the village policeman whom I had encountered on his bicycle, "tells me that in going to fetch assistance he met you, and that you told him you had come up the road from Salisbury to meet somebody. Is this dead man the man you were expecting to meet?"

"I believe he is," I answered.

He knitted his brows, evidently puzzled, and not liking it.

"Believe?" he said. "Don't you know?"

"I don't," I replied. "I have never seen this man before—to my knowledge. But I feel sure he is the man whom I was to meet at twelve o'clock, and whom I should have met, but for this accident."

He looked more puzzled than ever at that.

"Strange time to meet anybody!" he remarked. "And a strange place!"

"You are quite right," I assented. "Place and time were alike strange."

He hesitated a little, again closely inspecting me.

"Business appointment?" he asked brusquely.

"It was an extremely important business," I answered. "Of the very gravest importance!"

Again he hesitated.

"Well," he said, after a pause, during which his manner became something very like suspicious. "We

shall want to know more. If you'd an appointment with this man, you know his name."

"No, I don't," said I. "I have no more idea of his name than you have."

"How were you to know each other?" he asked, a little sneeringly. "Come!"

"By the mere fact of meeting at a certain place at a certain time," said I.

"Well, there'll be an inquest, of course," he went on, "and you'll have to be there——"

"Pardon me," I interrupted. "I don't know that I can. There is nothing that I can tell beyond what I have already told you. The fact is, that as this happened I ought to return to London at once—indeed, I think I shall charter my car to go straight there now!"

"No," he said resolutely. 'I can't allow that! You're the only person who, at present, can throw any light on this dead man's identity, and I feel confident you know something about him. Your car driver says he brought you up from the White Hart Hotel. Now I think you'd better give some account of yourself, and tell us what you were doing here—there's something rather suspicious about a meeting such as you hint at. I want to know."

"Very good!" I replied. "Then you will have to know—and you will have to keep what you know strictly to yourself! So, now listen."

CHAPTER XX

BUTTONS

I told the superintendent just as much as it was absolutely necessary to tell him; he listened open-mouthed and wide-eyed, as if he had been a child to whom some extraordinary fairy-tale is being set forth. By the time I had finished and had impressed upon him the high source of my credentials, originating with the Prime Minister himself, he had come to regard me as a person of great importance, and I saw that I should have no further trouble with him. But wonder-struck though he was, he kept his head, and his first remark was practical enough.

"Then you really think, Mr. Morrison, that this man lying dead in there"—we were talking in the road outside the cottage—"is one of the men who carried off Mr. Petherwin?" he asked. "One of the actual gang?"

"I do," said I. "What's more, I feel certain he's the man with whom Mallett, the fisherman, was engaged in a hand-to-hand scrap when Mallett was shot. There was hair, obviously torn from a man's head, in Mallett's tightly clenched fingers—it was of a somewhat unusual colour—bright chestnut. This

man—but you've seen him. It struck me at once."

"You haven't the least idea of where he came from to meet you?" he asked.

"Not the slightest," said I. "Probably from some distance. And you've found nothing on him that affords any clue?"

"There's his machine," he remarked suddenly. "The motor-bicycle. It'll bear a number-plate. We'd better see it."

The motor-bicycle still lay, in a fine state of wreckage, underneath the solid wall into which its rider had crashed. With the aid of a lamp or two we examined it. The number-plate had been removed; there was nothing whatever about the thing by which we could gain any information.

"What shall you do, now?" the superintendent asked when he and I were alone again. "Something will have to be done, of course."

"I shall wire the facts to Mr. Alstone as soon as the telegraph office opens at Salisbury," I answered. "That'll mean a few hours' delay, of course——"

"No," he said. "You can wire now—any time during the night—from the Southern Railway Station—the office is open day and night from Monday morning to Sunday morning. I suppose," he continued, "somebody'll be sent down from London?"

"I suppose so," said I. "Though I don't see what good will come of it—they can't get any more clue to this man's identity than we've got. Anyway, I'll

go down to Salisbury and wire. What will be done here?"

"We shall have to remove the body to the nearest inn, to await an inquest," he answered. "There's a village close by—this place is in the parish. After that—nothing, till the inquest. Where can you be found, Mr. Morrison? The White Hart? I'll look in there, about breakfast-time."

I left him then, and rejoining my car, went back to Salisbury, and to the telegraph office at the railway station. Thence I despatched two telegrams, one to Mr. Alstone, summarizing what had happened and asking for instructions; the other to Steppe, requesting him to come down to Salisbury by the next train. That done, I went off to the hotel, and after charging the night-porter to call me if by any chance anybody asked for me or any wire came for me before I rose, I repaired to bed, and slept so soundly that I was still heavy with sleep when some hand knocked loudly at my door. The knocking, I think, had been repeated several times before I woke to realize that it was broad daylight and to recollect the recent event.

The night-porter, not yet off duty, was at my door when I opened it, and with him were two middle-aged, well-dressed, quiet-looking men, who might have been, say commercial travellers of the higher class, but whom I instinctively guessed to be detectives.

"Two gentlemen to see you, sir," announced the night-porter.

"In reply to your telegram to Mr. A.," added one of the two, with a slight wink at me. "Shall we wait till you're dressed, Mr. Morrison?"

"No," said I. "Come in—we can talk while I dress." I called the night-porter back. "Order breakfast for three—in half an hour," I said. Then, closing the door, I turned to my visitors. "You have not lost much time," I remarked. "I scarcely expected to see anybody just yet."

"This isn't a case to be taken leisurely," answered the man who had first spoken, with a smile at my evident surprise. "Mr. Alstone had your wire in the middle of the night, and immediately communicated with our headquarters——"

"Scotland Yard, of course," I remarked, beginning to bustle about with my dressing.

"To be sure, Mr. Morrison. Better introduce ourselves—this is Detective-Sergeant Sparrow; I'm Detective-Inspector Cleaver."

"Famous men, both, I believe," said I.

"Well—well—we've had some experience, Mr. Morrison," he answered. "However, we were sent for and ordered to see Mr. Alstone. He read your telegram to us, told us to get a fast car, and come down to you at once, and hear all about it, and consult with you. So—here we are. One question, first, how-

ever—you have the packet that Mr. Alstone entrusted to your care?"

I pointed to the pillow from which I had just lifted my head.

"Under that," I said. "Intact."

"Mr. Alstone suggests that as it may be a source of anxiety to you, while all this is going on, you should deposit it at one of the banks here as soon as they open this morning," he continued. "You're at liberty to mention Mr. Alstone's name—to the manager."

"Good!" said I. "I shall be thankful to be rid of it, and there's small chance of handing it over, now."

"You feel sure this dead man is the man you came to meet?" asked Cleaver.

"No doubt of it!" I answered. "I think it's absolutely certain. But you—what are you going to do?"

"Our job—now that this has happened—is to endeavour to get some clue that will help towards ascertaining the present whereabouts of Mr. Petherwin," he said. "From, of course, whatever may be found on the dead man."

"Hopeless task!" said I. "There's nothing on him! The local police superintendent went through him in my presence. There isn't as much as an initial on his linen, and the number-plate on his motor-bicycle had been carefully removed."

"That rather looks as if, wherever he came from,

he set out after dark," remarked Sparrow. "Still, we may find something."

"I don't know what you'll find," I demurred. "Everything about him was most closely examined."

"Um!" said Cleaver. "Did the local police examine the buttons on his trousers, Mr. Morrison?"

"Ah, I don't know about that!" I admitted. "You mean—there might be the name of a tailor on them?"

"Extremely likely!" he replied dryly. "I've known identity established through that, before to-day. However, we'll take a look at everything, ourselves. A curious case, Mr. Morrison!"

"Are you pretty familiar with the details?" I asked.

The two men exchanged an amused smile.

"Why, to tell you the truth, Mr. Morrison," replied Cleaver, "we are! The fact is, we have been kept posted, in everything—by Mr. Alstone in London, and by the local police at Wickhampton. Yes, I think you may say we are quite up-to-date in our knowledge."

"Why haven't you been more in evidence, then?" I asked.

"That is all part of the—the game, if I may so phrase it," he replied. "We have been kept in reserve, as it were. State reasons—political reasons—all sorts of reasons. But—this affair rather alters the complexion of things."

"How?" I inquired.

"There appears to be a direct chance of tracking this gang through the death of one of its members," answered Cleaver. "That, at any rate, is what we're going to work on."

I was dressed by that time, and taking the Prime Minister's packet from under the pillow beneath which—and my head—it had rested since my belated going to bed, I conducted my visitors downstairs to the coffee-room. There, as we breakfasted, the police superintendent, coming to look for me, found us.

The local superintendent, duly introduced, was plainly impressed by the greatness of my two companions. But he had nothing to tell them beyond what I had already told them, and the conversation relapsed into mere exchange of theory and suggestion. The next practical thing to do was to let the two Scotland Yard men see the dead man, and after I had deposited the packet at a bank—whose manager was mightily astonished when he heard on whose behalf I left it in his charge—and had left a note for Steppe—from whom I had heard nothing—at the hotel, we set off in their car to the scene of the accident.

The dead man's body had been removed to an inn, not far from the cottage in which I had first seen it. It was now decently laid out, and the clothing which had been removed from it was in charge of the village constable—the same man who had first told

me of the smash and its victim. That clothing was the first thing the detectives asked for. It consisted of an overall suit, an Oxford blue flannel coat, a sweater, and a pair of grey flannel trousers. Within a minute, Cleaver, handling the trousers, nudged my elbow.

"What did I say to you, Mr. Morrison?" he whispered. "Trouser buttons, eh? Look there!"

He pointed a finger to the very ordinary metal buttons on the trousers. On the outer circle of each one appeared, in gilt, two names—the name of a person, the name of a place: *Flaxington, Worcester.*

Cleaver quietly folded up these trousers, after showing Sparrow what he had just shown me. He muttered two words in an aside to me, with a peculiarly knowing glance.

"Got it!" Then, seeing my incredulous look, he smiled. "The beginning, Mr. Morrison, the beginning! And any beginning's better than none!"

I looked round. The local superintendent was outside, talking to his men; the detectives and I were alone.

"You consider that a satisfactory clue?" I suggested.

"And a highly satisfactory one!" said Cleaver. "Flaxington, who is probably a tailor, or an outfitter, or a draper, or all three, at Worcester, supplied these trousers; possibly Flaxington can give information about this dead man—he may remember him by the

colour of his hair, which is a bit unusual. Anyhow, Mr. Morrison, Sparrow and I are now off to Worcester—and you'd better come with us."

"You're going at once?" I asked.

"At once! We've a magnificent car, all at our disposal—we'll go straight on," he answered. "By the end of this afternoon—who knows?"

I went with them. It was eleven o'clock when we set off from the village inn; just before three in the afternoon we pulled up at the Star Hotel in Worcester—ten minutes later we set out to seek the shop of Flaxington, tailor and outfitter.

Flaxington proved to be the owner of a business in ready-made clothing; his shop and he were easily found. The shop, was one of those places wherein you can get completely rigged out on the spot with everything a man wants in the way of garments. And in the window looking on the street there were two or three pairs of grey flannel trousers—the very marrow, said Cleaver cynically, of those he had brought with him.

Flaxington was a big, florid-faced, sharp-eyed man, who, I fancy, sensed police work as soon as he looked at my two companions. Perhaps Cleaver saw that he did; anyway, he lost no time in getting to business. He spread the tops of the trousers on the counter and pointed to the buttons.

"I fancy this garment has been bought at your shop, Mr. Flaxington," he said. "Your name's

there. Well, the young man who was wearing them was killed in an accident early this morning——"

Flaxington interrupted with a knowing look.

"Motor-bike?" he asked.

"That's so," agreed Cleaver. "It was on a motor-bike. Smashed into a wall. You know him, then?"

"No," said Flaxington. "At least, not who he is. If he's the chap I'm thinking of, he's a young fellow that I've seen about the city two or three times of late, riding a motor-bike. Tallish, well-built chap—got a head of hair on him that you could see a mile off—neither red nor ginger, but something between."

"That's the man!" exclaimed Cleaver. "But—you know his name?"

"No; know nothing about him, mister, except that, as I say, he's been about here a bit, and that he came into this shop one day last week and bought those trousers," answered Flaxington. "Paid cash for 'em, so of course I'd no occasion to ask his name nor his address." Then, seeing Cleaver's look of disappointment, he added: "There may be—probably are—people in the city that know him. What is it? Police business, eh?"

"We want to identify him," replied Cleaver. "There's nothing whatever on him that gives any clue to his identity."

"Aye, but you want more than that, I'm thinking," said Flaxington, with a shrewd wink. "Three of you, eh? And none of you Worcester men. But, as I

say, somebody may know him. If you like to look in again, before I close, I might tell you something. Look in about seven o'clock—I'll ask a question or two in a likely place."

We left Flaxington, and went back towards the Star Hotel, intent on a cup of tea. Cleaver appeared to be encouraged by the outfitter's remark that the dead man had been seen about Worcester; we should learn something yet, he said. We were, indeed, to learn something sooner than I expected, for as we neared the hotel, I saw, coming across to it from the Fore Street Station, Steppe—and with Steppe, Miss Petherwin's agent, Munro.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DOUBLE CLUE

Quick as I was to recognize Steppe, the two detectives were equally quick in recognizing his companion; they stopped, staring across the street.

"Good Lord! that's Munro, the private inquiry man!" exclaimed Cleaver. "What's he doing here? —surely not on our game!"

"I imagine he is," said I. "For the other fellow is Steppe, the young journalist I've told you about. Of course they're on our job—come across."

Steppe caught sight of me just then, and jogging Munro's elbow, drew his attention to us. They came in our direction, the detectives and Munro meeting with mutual nods of recognition; Steppe buttonholing me.

"What're you doing here, Morrison?" he demanded. "Got some notion?"

"What're you doing here?" I asked. "That's more like it. And didn't you get a wire from me from Salisbury early this morning?"

"I've had no wire from you," he replied. "Fact is, I've not been home since yesterday. Other things to do." He pointed to Munro, who was exchanging

greetings with Cleaver and Sparrow. "He's got a clue—an important one," he continued. "That's what brought us here to Worcester. But you?—and who are those chaps with you?"

"Two big pots from Scotland Yard," I replied. "We've got a clue, too. But we can't talk in the street—and there's a lot to talk about."

I led him back to the detectives; after a few words of explanation we all went into the hotel, and getting into a quiet place ordered tea. As soon as the waiter who took the order had vanished, Steppe plunged into matters.

"Look here, Morrison," he said. "You spoke of Salisbury just now—you've been there, of course. Do you know anything about this?"

He pulled out a folded newspaper and pointed to a passage which he had marked with blue pencil. Cleaver, Sparrow, and I bent over it—to our astonishment we saw it was a fairly full and accurate account o the fatal accident on the Salisbury-Amesbury road, with an intimate description of the dead man's appearance. Cleaver let out a groan of annoyance.

"Confound it!" he exclaimed. "We wanted to keep all that dark for a while. This is the work of some country newspaper reporter—he's got the news early this morning and wired it to some press agency. Of course, it'll be all over the place now."

"But this man, Morrison?" urged Steppe. "You think he was the fellow you were to meet? And—

one of the lot that collared Petherwin and Miss Travis —and possibly the man who shot Jim Mallett? You do?—well now, look here. Here we all are—on the same job. Are we going to pool our information and work together? Because Munro has a highly important clue, and I suggest he tells you all about it—if you tell him what yours is."

I looked at Cleaver; Cleaver nodded.

"Our clue is this, Steppe," said I. "The dead man at Salisbury had no papers on him, nor anything by which his identity could be established. But his trouser buttons bore the name of a Worcester tailor —Flaxington. So we came here at once to see Flaxington. Flaxington knew the fellow by sight, but he doesn't know who he was, nor his name, nor his address."

"All the same," remarked Steppe confidently, "we're getting on. There's no doubt this place—Worcester—figures in the business. For Munro's clue brought us to Worcester, just as yours brought you. Tell them about it, Munro."

Munro gave the detectives a glance which seemed to imply that they, as professionals in a game at which he, after all, ranked as an amateur, would understand his position.

"I am employed by Miss Petherwin," he said, in his mild, unobtrusive fashion. "My object, of course, is—the recovery of Mr. Petherwin. If the rest of you are willing to help me in that, I'm willing—eh?"

"Oh, we'll make common cause—common cause!" exclaimed Cleaver. "Our object is the same—the only difference is that Miss Petherwin commissions you; we're commissioned by—well, the Government, of course. Work together—now we've met. You know our clue—what's yours?"

The waiter came just then with the tea; Munro preserved silence until he had gone and Steppe had presided over the teapot. Then he spoke.

"Well," he said, after sipping his tea with an air of reflection, "my clue is pretty much akin to yours. Yesterday morning, first thing, I got a wire from Mr. Steppe there, at the Starboard Inn at Rumbelow Point. He asked me to go and examine a cave in the woods near Strillion Cove, adding that he had reason to believe Mr. Peters had been taken there by captors. I ascertained the whereabouts of this cave and went off to find it. There was no difficulty about that; the cave was easily found. I saw at once that people had been in it of late; the floor was much trampled, and there were evidences of occupancy in the shape of an old lunch-basket evidently thrown aside when its contents had been exhausted, cardboard boxes which had contained fruit; others that had held sandwiches, and so on. But there were certain things of real importance as clues. To begin with, there were two glass tumblers—good glass, possibly expensive glass, belonging to a set, and, in my opinion, though I'm not an expert in glass, old: I feel sure they'd come out of

some private house in which the glass was of superior quality. Then there were two empty soda-water siphons: each bore the name of a mineral water manufacturer here in Worcester. And there were two empty whisky bottles; each had a label. I have one now with me in this handbag—here it is. Now look at the label!"

He drew a bottle from his bag as he spoke, and we all crowded together to stare at the paper label to which he pointed:

VERY OLD ARDNASHEEN WHISKY
(10 Years in Bottle).

Sole Agents in Worcestershire and Oxfordshire:
GLENDINNING & HISSEY, WORCESTER.

The two detectives exchanged glances: I could see that they were impressed.

"Same label on the other bottle?" inquired Cleaver.

"Just the same," replied Munro. "That, and the soda-water siphons, and the two glass tumblers are safely locked up at the Starboard Light. Clearly, these people set out from Worcester on their predatory expedition against Mr. Peters, or Petherwin, and took provisions with them—eatables and drinkables."

"Evident!" muttered Cleaver.

"And now," continued Munro, "the thing is—can we trace them through the wine-merchants, Glendinning and Hissey? That's what we came down for—Steppe and myself."

"We've had no luck with the tailor," observed Sparrow.

"So far—so far," said Cleaver. "We may have yet. But I think these wine-merchants are more likely. This stuff," he went on, tapping the whisky bottle, "is, I should say, a self-whisky, not a blend—in fact, I've heard of it, I fancy, as a self-whisky, like Talisker, and that sort of thing. Now the probability is that it's not bought in any great quantity—not popular, as the more advertised blends are—and that these people, Glendinnings, will, accordingly, know the names of the customers to whom they supply it. Of course, you haven't been to them yet?"

"No—we'd only just arrived when you met us," replied Munro. "I'm going presently. If they can give me a list of the people hereabouts who buy this whisky from them as a regular thing, it'll merely be a question of weeding out. My belief, having in view all that Steppe has told me about Miss Travis's story—the general appearance, conversation, behaviour of the men who trapped her and Mr. Petherwin, the luxurious car in which they were carried off, the room in which she was imprisoned and so on—is that we're dealing with people of position.

They're no common, vulgar, ordinary thieves or malefactors, there, Cleaver—they're . . . somebody!''

''And therefore all the more difficult to catch,'' said Cleaver grumblingly. ''Brains!—put to bad purpose. However—one's settled. But—that paper, with the news of the accident? Where did you get it?—and when?''

''At the station here, just as we left the train,'' replied Steppe. ''It's a Birmingham evening paper—four o'clock edition.''

''Then, of course, it'll be all over the town,'' said Cleaver, in disgust. ''And sure as fate, if the rest of this gang are in Worcester somewhere, they'll see it! They'll recognize the description of the dead man as their pal who was sent to meet Morrison, and they'll know why he hasn't returned. Then—they'll be on the *qui vive,* as the French say. Well, you'd better try these wine-merchants, Munro. And then we'll drop in on the tailor again.''

Then, remarking that it wouldn't do for too many of us to show ourselves at once, he suggested that I should accompany Munro; the rest of them would await our return. And ascertaining the address of Glendinning and Hissey from the hotel people, Munro and I set off—Glendinning's office was in the side-street close by. I took advantage of our short walk there to ask Munro a question or two.

''Did you make any other discoveries while you

were down at Rumbelow Point?" I asked. "Or did Miss Petherwin?"

Munro was the sort of man who thinks before he speaks. He took some time about answering.

"Absolute discoveries—other than what I have in this bag, Mr. Morrison—none," he replied at length. "But I formed certain conclusions."

"Yes?" I said invitingly. "Are they—secret?"

"Why, I don't know that they are," he answered. "Miss Petherwin, who appears to be jealous of any feminine influence over her brother, was very strong on the notion that he'd run away with this pretty artist girl. I thought that was all nonsense! To begin with, if Mr. Petherwin wanted to marry Miss Travis, what was there to prevent his doing so—openly? To end with, a Chancellor of the Exchequer wouldn't either elope or marry just on the eve of the Budget! But Miss Petherwin is a woman—and women aren't good at reasoning."

"What were your conclusions?" I asked.

"That the whole affair is the work of a small gang of men—adventurers, probably—who were thoroughly conversant with Petherwin's habits and movements," he replied, with evident confidence. "Their object—money! And if this chestnut-haired chap hadn't been accidentally killed last night on his way to meet you, why, of course, they'd have succeeded. And now that I know all about the story Miss Travis told

in your presence I think we're narrowing things down. These people have a centre, a nest, somewhere —we've got to spot it!"

"This town, I think," said I.

"Maybe—and maybe some town in the neighbourhood," he answered. "The chestnut-haired fellow knew Worcester, that's fact! Now if only these wine and spirit people could tell us definitely who he is——"

But the partner of the wine and spirit business with whom we were presently closeted could tell us nothing. He smiled indulgently at the mere notion of his being able to identify the bottle of whisky which Munro exhibited to him.

"That whisky—Ardnasheen—has a great vogue around here," he remarked. "We have stocked and sold it for years—it's popular. But the folks who like it don't call it Ardnasheen—it is commonly known as Old Sandy. I couldn't possibly tell you who bought that particular bottle, and I, personally, don't remember any recent young gentleman customer resembling the man you describe. Moreover, we supply this whisky, bottled, to a good many hotels and taverns—this bottle may have been bought at any one of them. Anyway, we have no regular customers on our books who fits in with your man. If this man," he concluded, pointing to the evening paper which we had brought with us and in which we had marked the

description of the unknown motor-cyclist killed near Salisbury, "is known to have been seen in Worcester of late, why not try the police?"

We went back to the hotel and reported our failure. Munro was all for going to the local police there and then, but Cleaver demurred—first, he said, we would try the tailor again. And so, this time in a body, we went off once more to Flaxington's shop.

Flaxington rubbed his hands at sight of us: clearly, he was one of those good-natured souls who are willing to take a bit of trouble for anybody.

"Well, I've made two or three inquiries about that young fellow," he said. "Not much result, though."

"Have you got any particulars?" inquired Cleaver.

"Particulars—well, as you might say, not exactly particulars," replied Flaxington. "I've spoken to a pal or two of mine that's always in and around the town. You know—familiar with things. They've seen this chestnut-haired young fellow about of late—just now and then—but as to who he is, and what his name might be—ah, that I can't ascertain. But one of our policemen that I spoke to, he says he's seen him, on his motor-bike, coming into the town along the Droitwich road—maybe he hails from there. I'm sure of one thing about him, anyway—he doesn't belong to Worcester. This isn't such a big place that permanent residents could go unidentified long."

We left Flaxington's shop, accordingly, little wiser

than when we entered it. Munro wanted to go to the police headquarters then to enlist their assistance. But the two men from Scotland Yard, for some reason of their own, did not seem to favour this proposal.

"Let's take a look round," said Cleaver. "If we could identify the house and view described by the young lady—eh? The river—the hills in the distance——"

We were just then near the opening into the cathedral close, and six o'clock was striking from the high square tower. The last stroke died away—and suddenly a tune broke slowly on the succeeding silence. And the tune was "Men of Harlech."

CHAPTER XXII

COLD STEEL

Our three companions were by that time as conversant with Miss Travis's story of her imprisonment as Steppe and I were, for we had discussed it in every detail over our teacups, and when we heard the familiar tune being played, note by note, above our heads, we all paused and looked at each other with a sudden comprehension.

"That settles it!" exclaimed Cleaver suddenly. "This is the place! Worcester! And the next job is—the particular house."

"That oughtn't to be such a very difficult matter," remarked Steppe. "It looked out—that is, she, from her window, looked out—on the river, on some meadows beyond, and on hills in the distance. I suggest we get down to the riverside."

"The river is down there," said Munro. "Any of these side streets——"

But Cleaver, practical and painstaking, dived into a stationer's shop, to come back, a moment later, armed with a map. He drew us aside into a quiet corner and spread out his purchase.

"Here we are," he observed presently. "Here's

the cathedral—a good centre-point; here's the river. A long frontage, too—the house may have been any one of many. From that end of the city called Barbourne to this other called Diglis, it's a fair long stretch. However, let's make a start."

We went down to the river by way of College Green. And once down there, on the embankment that runs alongside the Severn, we saw that, even at that point, there were a great many houses, any one of which fitted in with Miss Travis's description. They were for the most part tall, old-fashioned houses of warm red brick, roomy places, with walled gardens at their bases, extending to the edge of the promenade along the river. There were more of such houses away to the left; still more away to the right. But that it was in one of these houses that Miss Travis had spent her few days of captivity I had no doubt whatever, for there, on the opposite side of the river, were meadows such as she had described, and beyond them, in the near distance, was a chain of hills, behind the crest of which the sun was already westering. Munro knew these hills and pointed them out —Hereford Beacon, Worcester Beacon, North Hill.

"Those are what the young lady looked out on," he said, with an air of finality, "and here's the river she saw, and there are the fields she spoke of. But as to the house"—he shook his head, glancing at the professional detectives—"case of minute inquiry, I think?" he concluded.

"We can't go knocking at the door of every house that looks on this river front," said Cleaver. "That's certain."

"What about the local police?" suggested Steppe.

But the two men from Scotland Yard evidently had no liking for this proposition. They drew aside; talking together; eventually they came back to us.

"We don't want too much publicity in this affair, yet, you know, gentlemen," said Cleaver. "The thing to do is to trace this fellow who was killed this morning. It's quite evident he'd some connection with this town. Everything in the case points to this town. This dead man bought his grey flannel trousers in this town—recently. The whisky bottles found by Mr. Munro there at Rumbelow came from this town. The view described by Miss Travis—there it is. And—we've heard the tune she heard, played from that very tower. We're on the spot—all we want now is a spot within that spot. And it seems to me that the surest way to get at that is to continue our investigations into the identity of the ginger-haired chap. And as we shall have to put up here and it's getting towards evening, I suggest that the best thing we can do is to go back to the Star, make our arrangements, and eat a bit of dinner."

"No hurry, eh?" said Steppe, a little sarcastically.

"Not with me, Mr. Steppe," answered the detective composedly. "Hurry's no good, sir—in my line—in my opinion. Slow and sure—eh, Mr. Munro?"

Munro made some half-joking remark; I took it that he kept his real opinion as to what should be done to himself. We all went back to the hotel, booked our rooms, ordered dinner; the two detectives got into a corner and talked confidentially; Munro occupied himself in writing letters; Steppe and I comforted ourselves with a cocktail in the smoking-room.

"What do you suppose these chaps'll do, Morrison?" he asked, nodding in the direction of the lounge in which we had left Cleaver and Sparrow.

"Not the faintest idea," said I.

"What shall you do?" he continued. "Lord bless us! somebody's got to do something!"

"Not much idea of that, either," I answered. "I dare say Cleaver's right—the thing to do is to trace the domicile of this dead man. He must have had a home, or something of its nature, somewhere about here—get at that, and we shall know a lot."

"Aye, but how to get at it!" he exclaimed. "It's a question of method. However, I'm not bound by these chaps—I've nothing to do with the police. I can follow my own line, if I like."

"Got any line in view?" I asked.

He hesitated for a moment, obviously thinking.

"Well, there's our own profession, Morrison," he said at last. "Anyway, the profession that was yours and that is mine. I've as much belief in a keen newspaper reporter as a sleuth-hound as I have in a cut-and-dried detective—perhaps more. A

smart young chap that wants to get on, and who knows what one real good scoop would mean to him—eh?"

"You think there might be such a youngster in Worcester?" I suggested.

"I reckon they've a local newspaper or two here, and that there'll be fellows on them who'd be keen enough on a likely job if it was put to their hands," he answered. "To my mind—the thing's here. We know quite well that this ginger-haired chap has been seen in this town—well, seems to me that any smart hand could locate him—that is, find out where he lived—in pretty quick time; a good deal quicker," he added, with a significant nod in the detectives' direction, "than those chaps will."

"Well, I suppose we're free to use our own methods," I said. "The only thing is that we must bear in mind the real object of our being here—and that's to trace Mr. Petherwin. And that reminds me—I must write a report of my doings to Mr. Alstone after dinner and catch the night mail with it—I haven't had time up to now. What shall you do, Steppe?"

"Don't know yet," he said. "But—I shan't be tied down to following Cleaver and his man. I'll go on my own."

Cleaver, however, made no attempt to dictate to any of us. We all dined together; the detectives made no reference whatever to the job that had brought us all there. And when dinner was over,

they both put on their hats and walked out into the streets without a word to us of their immediate intentions. Munro, too, went his way in silence. Steppe, having watched them depart, turned to me.

"Individual, rather than concerted action, appears to be the game, Morrison," he said. "Let's see—you're going to write a dispatch, aren't you?"

"If you like to call it so," said I.

"All right," he answered. "Then I'm going out—to do a bit of my own. See you later—in the smoking-room."

Left to myself, I spent the better part of an hour in writing a full account of my doings since arriving at Salisbury the previous afternoon—I felt that this would be what Mr. Alstone wished. A little before nine o'clock I made up a pretty bulky packet for him, and took it myself to the General Post-office, and that duty performed, I returned to the hotel, to wait for Steppe and the rest of my companions.

I found the smoking-room empty, except for two elderly men, one of whom, when I entered, was reading the evening newspaper aloud, while the other, sitting near, was listening. The first words I heard instantly attracted my attention.

"'. . . from a certain discovery made this afternoon by the local police, it would appear that the dead man hails from Worcester,'" read the holder of the newspaper. "That's all," he went on, laying the paper aside and taking off his spectacles. "Um—

seems to me I've some recollection of this young fellow, from the description. Bright chestnut coloured hair—seen him somewhere about of late."

"I remember him," said the other man. "Seen him up and down, now and again, on his motor-bicycle. He was staying at that big red brick house near the Deanery—Mrs. Hartopp-Courey's house. She's gone abroad for a year or two, and the house was let furnished a while ago to somebody—strangers. I've seen this copper-topped young chap come out of the gates."

"Oh, that place, eh?" said the first man. "Chantry House? Oh, just so! Ah, I felt sure I'd seen him. Well, he seems to have had a fine old smash, poor fellow! Odd thing there was nothing on him to show who he was. However, his friends'll know by now."

These two men strolled out of the room presently, and when they had gone I hastened to pick up the newspaper the spectacled man had thrown aside. It was a later edition than the one I had previously seen, and there were rather more details of the accident on the Amesbury-Salisbury road. I re-read the sentence which I had just heard quoted. But, as the reader had said, there was no more; nothing followed to show what the certain discovery made by the local police really was. Yet—I knew something now. Without doubt, the house we wanted was that mentioned by the man who had just gone out—Chantry House. I be-

gan to see through things. Chantry House, vacated by Mrs. Hartopp-Courey, whoever she might be, during her trip abroad, was to be let furnished—the gang we were anxious to discover had probably taken it from a house agent for the express purpose of using it as a centre for their operations; in Chantry House, at this moment, Mr. Petherwin was, no doubt, still imprisoned. Well . . .

It was just five minutes past nine then. Should I wait for the return of the others, or should I go out and do a little prospecting myself—alone? I had no idea as to the whereabouts of Cleaver and Sparrow, or of Munro, or of Steppe. Steppe, I fancied, had carried out his project of going to the local newspaper offices; the detectives were, doubtless, closeted with the local police authorities; Munro, who had all along shown a liking for individual effort, was probably wandering around likely quarters—I might meet him. Anyway, out I went, to view Chantry House, and to gain some notion of its exterior, with a view to effective operations. And by that time having gained a fairly good idea of the geography of the old town, I went down to the riverside by way of Broad Street and Bridge Street, and at the foot of the last named turned along the South Quay.

That was a dark evening for the time of year; the sun had been set for nearly two hours and the sky was thickly covered with heavy cloud, rolling up from the south-west. Indeed, rain was threatening, which

was probably the reason of the almost complete desertion of the promenade that lay along the riverside beneath the tall old houses and the vast walls of the great cathedral. I encountered very few people there, either coming or going. That was agreeable to my plans—I wanted to spot the Chantry House. The men in the smoking-room of the Star had said it was near the Deanery; I knew the Deanery by sight, we had located it on Cleaver's map earlier in the evening; it was a big, high-walled house standing boldly above everything a little to the northward of the cathedral itself. There were many other houses of like sort near it; their fronts, I concluded, must be at the other side, in some street opening off the Close or the main street. But the backs came down to the embankment, terminating in gardens shut in by high walls; it was impossible to see into any of them. There were entrances to them, though, in these walls—doors, set deep in the masonry, and I remembered that when we had first walked along there, after our discovery about the chimes, I had noticed name-plates on some of these doors. Now, if I could identify the house I wanted by one of those name-plates . . .

I took several turns up and down the embankment before I considered the coast clear enough to allow me to do what I wanted to do. But at last people—chiefly young couples going along arm-in-arm—cleared off; eventually that stretch was left to me and two men, smoking their pipes, who strolled up and

down, passing and repassing me, and talking in low voices. They suddenly disappeared—and taking a box of matches from my pocket, I began a systematic examination of the doorways set in the high walls.

It was at the third or fourth attempt that I found what I wanted—a much tarnished, old-fashioned brass plate, inscribed "Chantry House." The door to which it was affixed was old, too, and not in over-good repair; it badly needed a coat of paint, and one of its lower panels was cracked. But it was securely locked or bolted, perhaps both, from within, and though the keyhole was big enough, being that of an ancient lock, there was nothing to be gained by peering through it. I wanted to get on the other side of that door—into the garden to which it gave admittance. I examined the masonry on either side; there were cracks and projections here and there which afforded finger and foot hold. And having looked round to make sure that nobody was coming along the embankment, I clambered up, and first assuring myself that the top of the wall was free of broken glass, swung a leg over the coping. The next instant I had quietly dropped into the garden amongst a thick mass of laurel. There were deep shrubberies all round the edge of the garden, and I began to pick my way amongst them towards a light which burned in one of the lower windows of the house.

I was close up to that window and fancying myself secure, when, without warning, a vice-like grip fas-

tened itself on the back of my neck, and at the same instant something small and round and cold was pressed relentlessly into my right temple. I knew that, too—the barrel of a revolver.

CHAPTER XXIII

UNDER COMPULSION

I don't know how these men had come up behind me, but when I got some hold on my shocked senses, there they were, two of them, bulking big in the dim grey light. One had his extremely muscular fingers on the scruff of my unfortunate neck; the other was still pressing the barrel of his revolver or automatic pistol into the hollow of my temple. And I knew myself then for a damned fool—and tried to get my wits to work.

It was I, after all, who spoke first—spoke, no doubt, more quickly than you would have thought possible.

"There's no need to hold my neck like that!" I gasped. "That hurts! The revolver's enough! Let go!"

The man who was holding me laughed or growled —I couldn't quite make out which—and relaxed his grip. But his fingers promptly transferred themselves to my left arm.

"Very good," he said cynically. "Perhaps that's more comfortable. But you move a finger and slap through you goes a bullet! Hear that? Now clasp your fingers across your chest—so—and—— No trifling!"

I made haste to obey him—there was that in his voice which convinced me that he was the sort of person who means what he says. I clasped my fingers above the buttons of my waistcoat. The other man collared my right arm; between them they shoved me forward; a few steps and we came to a door in the basement wall of the house. One of them used his free hand to throw it open; the opening revealed a long, stone-paved passage, lighted by a couple of gas jets, and with doors opening off it at either side. Along this they forced me, or, I should say, conducted me—there is no need to use force on a man who knows that he has no choice but to obey. And at the third door on the right they paused, and opening that pushed me into a lighted room which I saw at once was used as a butler's pantry.

They relaxed their hold on my arms then, but only with a fresh order to put them up above my head. The man who had the revolver remained covering me in very menacing and unpleasant fashion; the other went through my pockets in a fashion equally thorough, laying out on a table everything he took from them. And in my hip pocket, of course, he found the automatic pistol with which Steppe had obligingly furnished me when we went down together to Rumbelow Point. He showed no surprise at unearthing that, but it seemed to me that he was disappointed that he discovered no papers other than a few private letters. And as if to make certain that I had no

secret pockets in my clothing, he went over me again, even to the extent of examining the inside of my waistcoat and turning out the lining of my hat.

The next proceedings of these two men were summary and unexpected. Without a word to me they picked up all the things they had taken from my pockets and, quitting the room, turned the key in the lock from outside. I heard their footsteps hurrying along the stone pavement of the passage; then there was silence.

Being fairly trapped through my own foolishness I sat down and examined my surroundings. With a polite consideration for which I was intensely grateful to them, they had left me my pipe, tobacco, and matches, and after seating myself in a chair in which, I fancied, many corpulent butlers had taken their ease, I began to smoke and to look about me. Without a doubt this was a butler's pantry; I had seen its like in many a country house. There was a safe in a corner, in which, no doubt, the family plate and silver reposed; there were shelves filled with old glass; there were chests, doubtless lined with green baize; there was a narrow bed—the idea was in the old days that a butler should always sleep in company with the things which it was his particular province to look after. I gazed with some interest at the window—just as I expected it would be, it was barred. Beyond a few very old prints on the walls and an old clock and ornaments on the mantelpiece there was

nothing else to look at, except that over the door there was a transom window of plain glass, through which shone the lights of the passage, and that in one corner of the room there was a low door, approached by three or four steps leading downward from the floor—that I took to be the entrance to a wine-cellar.

I sat smoking and meditating for some time. There was no doubt that I had put myself absolutely in the power of the men who had carried off Mr. Petherwin and Miss Travis—Mr. Petherwin, in all probability, was at that moment incarcerated in some other region of that very house. While they had held me up and searched me I had taken a careful look at my captors. They were big, muscular fellows, well-dressed, having all the outward appearance of gentlemen, but both of a determined and perhaps truculent cast of countenance—not the sort of men to be trifled with in any way. And I was certain, after looking them well over, that they were the two men I had seen loafing about the embankment by the river who had disappeared before I had tried the garden door; probably they had watched me.

But now—what were they going to do with me? I had no fear that they would murder me. That wouldn't pay. And they, of course, were probably fully aware of what had happened to their associate, the chestnut coloured hair man, who had come to his end the previous midnight. They must know that

owing to that unforeseen catastrophe their game had gone all wrong. What had seemed like being a crushing victory for their side had been turned by sheer ill-luck into an unsatisfactory draw—in cricket parlance. Still, they had me—and I was locked up there for some purpose.

The time slowly ticked itself away on the old clock set above the mantelpiece; I began to weary of the solitude and inaction. Suddenly, I got a curious feeling that I was being watched, and I turned sharply in my chair to glance at the transom above the door. And I had been right in my suspicion; as I looked round, a head disappeared, too quickly for me to see the face; all I saw was a dome of dark hair. Listening intently I heard soft footsteps going away, as of a man who walks in his stockings, or wears felt-soled slippers.

It was some minutes after this that I heard loud, unashamed footsteps outside in the stone-paved passage. Then the key turned in my door, and the two men who had collared me came in again, the possessor of the revolver still holding it carelessly, but obtrusively, in his right hand. They went straight to business, perching themselves on two chairs between the door and the table, and having the table between me and them. The man who had searched me opened his lips and spoke sharply.

"You're Morrison, of Rumbelow Point?" he asked.

I had made up my mind as to what I should do, if questioned, and I replied just as sharply:

"I am!"

"You've been employed by the Government as an agent in this matter?"

I shook my head at that.

"By the Government, no. By Mr. Alstone, yes," I answered.

"The Prime Minister, then. Are you the man to whom Mr. Alstone entrusted a sum of money which was to be handed over to an agent of ours at a certain rendezvous near Salisbury last night?"

"Yes, that is so," I said. "I am the man."

"We learn from the papers that our man was accidentally killed. What do you know about it?"

"What I know about it is this—briefly. I waited for your man, with Mr. Alstone's packet in my pocket, at the third milestone on the Salisbury-Amesbury road, from twelve o'clock until, I should say, half-past. Had your man come, I should have handed the packet over to him—that was all I was charged to do. He didn't come. Instead, a policeman came along on his bicycle and told me a motor-cyclist had had an awful smash a little way up the road. I went there, and found the man in question dead. I concluded he was your man."

"Unfortunately, he was our man. Well—what did you do with the packet?"

I had felt all along that this was what they were

after—anxiety about the money; wonder if there was any chance of their getting it. Secretly jubilant that they now had no chance whatever—as far as I could see—I was still careful enough to keep all trace of satisfaction out of my voice.

"As soon as this happened," I replied, "I communicated with Mr. Alstone. He sent me instructions to Salisbury to deposit the packet at a bank there, in his name; I did so, of course."

I was watching them carefully, and I saw the chagrin and disappointment that came into their eyes. Each remained silent for a moment; then the man who had asked all the previous questions spoke again.

"If you placed that packet in a bank at Salisbury, you'd get a formal receipt for it," he said. "That's not amongst the papers I took from you. Where is it?"

"I posted it to Mr. Alstone, at once," said I. "Naturally."

The answer evidently satisfied him. Suddenly he fired off a sharp question of a different sort.

"What are you doing here—in Worcester?" he demanded. "Be plain!"

"I see no reason why I should be otherwise, as things are," I retorted. "You're questioning me at the point of a revolver. Moreover, I don't know why I should keep anything back; this is far more your affair than mine. I am here in Worcester for this

reason—when I communicated the news of what had happened to your man to Mr. Alstone, he immediately sent off two very experienced Scotland Yard men——"

He interrupted me with an uplifted finger.

"Names?" he asked peremptorily.

"Cleaver, one; Sparrow, the other," I replied. "They came to Salisbury and examined your man, his machine, and his clothing. They found he was wearing a pair of new grey flannel trousers which had been bought here in Worcester; the buttons bore the name of one Flaxington, a tailor and outfitter in this city. So they came along here at once, to make inquiries, and I came with them."

The man with the revolver snarled.

"That's a spy's part!" he snapped out, with a venomous look at me. "You know what treatment a spy gets—in warfare?"

"I'm not aware that this is warfare," I retorted. "And if it is, allow me to say that it's against the rules of civilized warfare to shoot at innocent men from behind hedges, as somebody did at me in my own garden!"

The two men glanced at each other—their surprise was evident, and, I thought, palpably genuine.

"That was no work of ours, Morrison!" said the man who had done all the questioning. "None of our party ever shot at you—nor at anyone else. That's a fact. Weapons may have been shown, but they've never been used."

"Who shot the fisherman, Jim Mallett?" I asked, point blank.

"None of us, anyway. We read of it in the papers, but we had nothing to do with it," he asserted. "That is the sure truth!"

"The man whose dead body I saw at midnight had bright chestnut coloured hair," said I. "Mallett had a tuft of hair like that tightly clasped in his fingers when found."

He nodded.

"I know," he said. "But that man—the man smashed up this morning—didn't shoot Mallett. He had a scrap with Mallett, and Mallett tore a handful of hair out of him. Then he left Mallett, and a few minutes afterward, hearing a shot, went back and found Mallett dead. But—he didn't shoot him."

There was something in his asseveration that led me to believe him. I began to think after all, there was more mystery in this than was represented by these men and their doings. But he went on with his questioning.

"Well—there are others of you here in Worcester," he said. "We've watched you—we watched you, yourself, to-night. Who are the others beside you and the detectives?"

"One is a private inquiry agent, Munro, employed by Miss Petherwin," said I, now fully determined to let them see how hopelessly they were being cornered. "The other is a young newspaper man, Steppe."

"Have they any clues?" he asked.

"Munro has a clue," I replied. "He searched the cave in which you spent the afternoon with Mr. Petherwin and Miss Travis, and found two empty whisky bottles——"

He interrupted me with a glance of vexation and a muttered remark to his companion; it was plain my news had disconcerted him.

"Well?" he said presently. "Any other clues?"

"As a matter of fact, there are a good many clues," I answered, almost triumphantly. "Miss Travis afforded them. She described the view from her window—a river and hills. The river is, of course, the Severn; the hills are those across there, the Malvern Hills. And another excellent clue—the chimes in the cathedral here play tunes at twelve o'clock and other hours, and one of them is the 'Men of Harlech.' Miss Travis told all that to the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary——"

A tap came at the door. One of the men answered it, and came back with a neatly spread tray, on which were sandwiches, biscuits, a bottle of claret, with the cork drawn. He set it on the table and nodded to me.

"You'll have to stay here all night, Morrison," he said. "No harm'll come to you. And I repeat what I said to you before—none of our lot ever shot at you, nor at anybody. We're not murderers, even if we do carry weapons."

Then, without another word, he and his companion

withdrew, locking me in. And quick as thought I leaped for a chair and, standing on it, peered through the transom to watch them. They opened the door of another room immediately opposite mine—there, evidently awaiting their return, stood—*Sherman!*

CHAPTER XXIV

THE GRATING

I had a clear view of Sherman. He was standing, in a full light, a little way within the room immediately opposite that in which I was locked up; it seemed to me that he was talking to some person within that room whom I could not see. But as the man who had just left me entered, he turned to them, and before they closed the door I had seen from the expression on his face that he was undoubtedly anxious about something—probably about the result of their examination of me. Sherman, without a doubt . . . and now I knew that when Steppe and I had interviewed him that morning he had bluffed us, in a certain degree, at any rate.

But the door I was watching closed, and I saw no more of Sherman and the other men, his associates. I got down from the transom, cursing myself for my folly in running into this danger and wondering what on earth would happen next. I was absolutely at the mercy of these men, and I had no doubt that they were utterly unscrupulous. Nobody knew where I was; it might be some time before Steppe or any of the others could get on my track. Possibly Sher-

man and his gang, realizing that their chance of handling the ransom money had vanished when I obeyed Mr. Alstone's orders and deposited it in the bank at Salisbury, would now make their escape, leaving me to starve. I felt, anyway, that they would not remain longer in that house, knowing what they did; they would be off, under cover of the night.

The thought of possible starvation made me remember the tray of provisions which had been brought into my prison. There it lay, on the table, and it looked inviting. The wine was of a good vintage, and the cork, very considerately, had been drawn and then replaced; a beautiful old claret glass flanked the bottle. But how did I know the wine might not be drugged? It was far from unlikely. And as I was neither hungry nor thirsty, I left food and drink alone and began—hopelessly enough—to take another look round the room on the chance of finding some means of escape.

There was nothing to be done at the windows; it was not only barred but screwed up. As for the door, I knew it to be locked; there had been no mistaking the turning of the key from outside when the two men left me. But there was the door in the corner of the room, approached by two or three steps sunk in the floor, the door which I had taken as the entrance to a wine-cellar. It was against all chances of probability that it should be unlocked, and I had not the least hope of success when I stole down the steps and

tried it, for, to tell the truth, I felt as hopelessly caged as a rat in a trap. Yet try it I did, and to my utter astonishment found that it yielded to my hand.

I pushed this door open, gently, and when I had got it free of the timber in which it stuck a little, poked my head into whatever was beyond. That was inky blackness and an atmosphere which suggested damp, mould, and disuse; it was, moreover, evil-smelling, and in any other circumstances would have made me beat a hasty retreat. But my present circumstances would have forced me into an underground passage, and I pushed that door still further open, staring into the black cavity. Something rustled away in there—rats, no doubt. But no rats could stay me when the slightest chance of escape offered, and presently striking a match from the box in my pocket, I prepared to explore.

It was little that I could see with so poor a light, but I made out several steps before me. I found at once that they were not merely damp, but thick with viscous stuff into which the toe of my shoe trod unpleasantly. Still, I got down them, by exercising the greatest caution, and after burning another match or two, discovered that it was what might have been used as a cellar but much more resembled a dungeon. The floor was of beaten earth, the walls glistened with moisture; I had a suspicion that there were live things there of some horrible sort. But suddenly, when one of my matches went out, sooner than it should, I

was aware of a faint show of light down there, and presently, striking another match and creeping gingerly towards it across the distasteful floor, I found out whence it came. On one side of the place the earth from above had been cut away, and at the top of this cavity, and evidently communicating with the garden in which I had been surprised and seized, was a grating—I saw the stars through its ribs.

Letting the match die out, and standing there in the darkness, I reached up and felt about that grating. It was, of course, thickly rusted, within and without, but I could get my fingers through its bars and obtain a good hold on them; the all-important question was, could I move the grating bodily from its bed? But here, again, I had good luck. The grating was fixed in its cavity at a height of about four feet above a sort of shelf or bank of earth in which the cavity terminated; by getting into the cavity, doubled up, I could, by standing on this shelf, put my rounded shoulders against the under-surface of the grating and then, by straightening myself, force it out of its setting. If I could only do that. . . .

I waited for a moment, listening for any sound from above. None came. I crept into the cavity, conscious that I was becoming filthy and slimy in the process, and bunching myself up under the grating, took a deep breath and exerted all my strength. My first impression was one of impending utter failure; it seemed to me that I might just as well have

tried to shift one of the pyramids; the thing felt as if it were embedded in concrete. I stopped, gasping, recovered my breath, pulled myself together again, and made a second attempt. I was just about giving it up and feeling like dropping on the beastly floor beneath me, when one side of the grating gave way. I knew then that unless some of my captors appeared then and there I should, in a few minutes, be far beyond their reach.

And so I was. Having once dislodged the grating on one side, it was a fairly easy thing to work it loose on the other, force it up bodily, turn it over outside, and slide it on to the earth of the garden bed in which it had been set. All I had to do then was to scramble after it, which I made haste to do, heedless of damage to hands, knees, and clothes. I must have looked a pretty sight when I emerged from that cellar—indeed, I created a fine sensation when I came within human ken ten minutes later, bleeding, muddied, and beslimed—but I cared nothing.

Breathless, but spitefully rejoicing, I tore across the garden, climbed the wall overlooking the embankment of the river, and was over it and running along the riverside, careless of direction, and as if I had a pack of hellhounds after me—all in a burst, and possibly, in a sort of subconscious activity.

When I got my full senses, I found I had run to the left instead of to the right, and had passed the

foot of the cathedral steps and the ferry. To gain the centre of the town I had to go round by the winding street that leads past the Edgar Tower. By that time there were very few people about; indeed, I scarcely met anyone as I hurried along, keeping close to the walls and in the shadows. But just as I had got into the main street and was wondering if I could reach the hotel without being stopped, questioned, and perhaps arrested by a policeman, I saw a man coming along on the same pavement whom I must inevitably run into. He was a big man; he might be a plain-clothes policeman. And at that I slipped into a doorway, hoping he would pass on without seeing me. He did pass on, very hurriedly; he didn't see me. But I saw him, for the light of a neighbouring lamp fell full on his face as he went by, and I saw every feature clearly. And he was Rutherford!

I felt no surprise at seeing Rutherford there. I had known, well enough, for all that day, that things were coming to a crisis. Evidently the crisis was to materialize there in Worcester; fate, or something, had brought Rutherford to Worcester. But as he was there, I wanted to know where he was going, and as quietly as I could, and stepping along on the tips of my toes, and walking close to the wall, I followed him a little. But not far. He suddenly turned down a side street that led to the Deanery and the houses near it, and I knew then that he was undoubtedly

making for the house in which Sherman and his associates were still discussing the news they had got from me.

I let Rutherford go his way then, and made my own to the hotel. And as I came to its front I was aware that things were going on there. Steppe, Munro, and the two Scotland Yard men were outside on the pavement, standing beside a big private car in company with three other men who had evidently just got down from it. One of them turned his face towards the light as I hurried up, and in him I recognized Lassiter.

That certainly surprised me. Perhaps I ought not to have been surprised, but I was; that Lassiter would turn up had never occurred to me. I glanced sharply at the men with him, and immediately set them down as detectives; I saw, moreover, that they were evidently well known to Cleaver and Sparrow, who were talking to them.

I ran into the middle of this group—to be hailed first by Steppe, who drew back from me with a look of disgust at my condition.

"Good Lord, Morrison!" he exclaimed. "Wherever have you been? In the river—or in the sewage works?"

"Don't be an ass, Steppe!" said I. "You might guess where I've been. I've been in the house where Petherwin's no doubt still imprisoned—I was trapped into it, and I've escaped from it. And I've just seen

Rutherford going towards it. Look here—there's no time to lose! We'd better surround it—I know which house it is, now."

"Why, so do we, Mr. Morrison," said Cleaver, who had been staring me over from top to toe. He pointed to Lassiter. "He knows—he's brought us the information. Of course, we're going to make a raid. But—you can't very well go in that condition—there's blood——"

"Nothing but scratches," I interrupted. "I'm going with you, anyway, and if we're not quick in going——"

Lassiter touched my arm in his usual deferential fashion, at the same time drawing my attention to a dapper-looking suitcase which he carried.

"If you would come with me inside the hotel, sir," he said, precise and punctilious as ever in his speech, "I think I can accommodate you in the way of a change of garments—I never travel unprepared for contingencies. We are much of a figure, sir."

"There's no hurry, Mr. Morrison," said Cleaver. "We've got to get the local police yet. Some of them will be here in a few minutes. Go and repair your damages—we'll hear your story as we go along."

I took Lassiter to the room I had booked earlier in the evening. He was attention itself, taking upon his own shoulders the getting of hot water, the laying out of clothes and all the rest of it. But what I wanted more than anything was to hear the reason of his

presence, and I pressed him to tell me all about it while I washed away the filth and dirt of that slimy cellar.

"It is not a long story, sir," he said. "Merely one in which the details fit one into another, sir. You see, sir, at a somewhat early hour of this afternoon I purchased a copy of an evening newspaper, and there read of the fatal accident which had happened to a young gentleman on the highway between Amesbury and Salisbury at midnight—the unfortunate young man, sir, was reported as having hair of a light chestnut colour. Well, sir, I remembered immediately that not very long ago, Mr. Rutherford was visited at Mr. Petherwin's private residence in town by a young friend of his who had hair of this particular colour, and whose name, sir, was Midwood, Mr. Cyril Midwood—he was, I understood, a relation of Mr. Rutherford. When Mr. Midwood left, sir, I packed his things for him, and I found in one of his suitcases an old label with the address at Worcester—Chantry House, Worcester, sir——"

"That's it, Lassiter!" said I. "Chantry House! That's the place!"

"Just so, sir," continued Lassiter imperturbably. "Well, sir, I connected the peculiarly coloured hair with what I knew, or recollected, of this affair at Rumbelow Point, and after duly considering the matter, I proceeded to the Prime Minister's official residence, sir, and was admitted in due course to his

presence. I told him what I knew, sir; he had already been in communication, I think, with you and with Mr. Cleaver, and eventually, sir, he sent me down here in company with two detective officers from Scotland Yard. I think that is really all, sir—but what is yet to come, I do not know."

"Lassiter!" said I, hurrying along with my repairs, "have you up to now had any suspicion of Rutherford?"

He shook his head in a fashion which seemed to suggest that on that point there was a great deal that might be said.

"I cannot say that I have ever been greatly impressed by Mr. Rutherford, sir," he answered. "In my opinion, Mr. Rutherford is not the sort of person to be trusted with the important position he has held. Of course, sir, Mr. Rutherford is not, and never has been, officially employed by Mr. Petherwin in Mr. Petherwin's own official capacity—Mr. Rutherford, sir, has only been secretary to Mr. Petherwin as a private gentleman; he was employed in that way before Mr. Petherwin took office. But Mr. Rutherford has had the opportunity of learning secrets, sir, and I fear, sir, that he has been mixed up in this wicked plot."

"Have you any reason for thinking that beyond what you discovered to-day, Lassiter?" I asked.

"I was somewhat suspicious about Mr. Rutherford's behaviour and movements at Rumbelow at the time of

the disappearance, sir," he replied. "I have reason for believing that Mr. Rutherford was in the neighbourhood when he was supposed to be in town."

"Ah!" I exclaimed. "Possibly staying at Sherman's!"

Before he could answer that, Steppe looked in at the door.

"Come on!" he said. "We're all ready!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE DOUBLE DRAWING-ROOM

Lassiter and I followed Steppe downstairs to a room which the hotel people had put at Cleaver's disposal. In view of what Cleaver had said before I went up to avail myself of the valet's offer I expected to find a complete posse of local police there; to my astonishment there was no one there but Cleaver, Sparrow, and Munro; the two detectives who had accompanied Lassiter in his hurried run from London during the evening had disappeared. Cleaver saw my surprise, and smiled.

"All right, Mr. Morrison," he said. "We're in a better state of preparation than you think for. Sparrow and I have done our bit since you last saw us—I mean, since we left you after dinner. We made certain discoveries for ourselves, and Lassiter there put the finishing touch to them. Chantry House is our objective, and——"

"Sorry to interrupt you," said I, breaking in on him, "but from what I've seen and learnt and been through this evening, if you aren't in Chantry House jolly quick you'll find it empty. Those men——"

He checked me, smiling at my impetuousness.

"No," he answered, "that's all right. Chantry House, Mr. Morrison, has been under strict observation by the local police for the last two hours. No doubt they saw you get away from it, and no doubt saw Rutherford enter it—their instructions from me are to do nothing in the way of showing themselves or giving the merest hint of their presence until the right moment arrives. But the house is watched—back, front, sides. And so is the riverside, and so is the ferry."

"Ferry?" said I. "What ferry?"

For answer, he spread out his map of the town and its environs on the table and proceeded to point to it.

"See there?" he asked. "There, just beneath the cathedral walls on the riverside, is a ferry that takes one across the Severn to the meadows opposite. Now, look at that—there's a path leads from the landing-place across the river to the suburb called St. John's. That path goes by Sling Pool Walk and Swan Pool Walk to Bramford Road, and in Bramford Road there's a certain garage, Mr. Morrison, and in that garage is the car in which Mr. Petherwin and Miss Travis were carried off from Rumbelow. And—it's all ready to carry these chaps off from Worcester!"

I stared at him with a sudden sense of admiration.

"You've been busy!" said I.

"So—so," he admitted, with a laugh. "But now—you've been in Chantry House? Tell us all about it—how you got in—how out? There's no hurry—

those men are trapped already. If they go out, back or front—our men are there. But, if possible, I want to get them inside. Now—your story, briefly!"

I told them what had happened to me, putting the facts as concisely as I could. Cleaver listened keenly, and when I came to an end, shook his head in a fashion that showed a desire for still more knowledge.

"The great hold we've got on this gang, of which, no doubt, Rutherford is one member and Sherman another, is not the fact that they carried off Petherwin for ransom, but that one of them shot Mallett," he said. "Murder—we want the actual murderer! Who is he? Sherman? Maybe—he lived close by. Rutherford? Possibly, for Lassiter here has already told us that Rutherford was down there at Rumbelow and about that district when he was supposed to be in London. Now, if we can only get some one of this lot to incriminate another—eh? But—the next thing is to get inside the house. That's our job—the lot of us here; the outside's already fixed."

"And how are you going to get inside?" I asked. "I should say you'll have a nice job to do it."

He smiled knowingly at that.

"No," he answered, with a look at his colleague. "And that's provided for. Mr. Morrison, there's generally something turns up in these affairs. This lot hired this house, furnished; they took over with it a man and his wife as butler and cook-housekeeper. Well, these two have become suspicious; their sus-

picions increased when they read the news in this evening's paper; when Sparrow and I visited the police-office to-night, we found the man there, with the police. And when we go, presently, we shall find the front door open to us. That's one important factor—the other is that the people at the garage were to have that big car all ready for departure at one o'clock this midnight—see?"

I saw the whole thing then, and said so. But I also saw the possibilities of infinite danger, and said that, too.

"Well, it's for you and Mr. Steppe to say if you'll come in at it," replied Cleaver. "I've a pretty good notion how to trap these fellows, and we're all armed——"

"I'm not," said I, "they took my revolver away."

"Here's another for you—an automatic pistol," he answered promptly, drawing it from his pocket. "I've two. Now let's be moving—if the thing works out as I've planned, we'll have a successful coup. You two," he looked smilingly at Steppe and myself, "are in for a bit of adventure, eh? As for Lassiter here, solemn as he looks, he's a demon for it—eh, Lassiter?"

"I have reasons, Mr. Cleaver, for desiring to pursue this matter to its logical conclusion," replied Lassiter gravely. "As to danger, gentlemen, I, too, am not unprovided with a deadly weapon."

"Aye, and know how to use it, if need be, I'll war-

rant!" laughed Cleaver. "Well—it's close on the agreed time, so we'll go."

It was within a few minutes of midnight when we left the hotel and passed down the deserted streets to that on which the frontage of Chantry House came out. I had not seen the front before; it stood amongst a thick plaiting of trees and amidst other old buildings; I saw at once how easy it had been for Cleaver and the local police to set a watch on it. And as we made our way towards it, Cleaver tapped my arm.

"There are men watching all round here, Mr. Morrison," he whispered, "and they're just as thick at the back. Now, all we want is cuteness and courage—take your tip from me."

I was beginning to understand that Cleaver, whom I had at first thought of as a slow-going individual, was pretty well provided with the qualities he had just recommended; certainly he showed great coolness and powers of generalship now that a critical moment was at hand. Getting us together in the porch of the old house—which, from outside, looked silent and dark, save for a faint spark of light in one downstairs and one upstairs window—he whispered his final instructions.

"We shall find this door open," he said. "We file in quietly. On the right hand in the hall is a door which will also be open. We pass in there—every one of you with his gun ready. That door admits to a double drawing-room, the two halves sepa-

rated by curtains. The rear half has been used by these fellows as a living-room; they've taken their meals in there, and they ordered supper in there for half-past eleven to-night. If we can only overhear some of their talk, see? Now you all understand? Be ready to cover your man at any second—and when I give the word, draw aside the curtains, and let every man we find there see that he *is* covered."

The door opened easily and silently; one by one the six of us—Cleaver, Sparrow, Munro, Lassiter, Steppe, and myself—slipped into the hall, and instantly into the room of which Cleaver had spoken. It was all as he had said—there were the curtains shutting off the second half of the room, and from the other side of them came the sound of voices, the rattle of knives and forks, and clinking of glass and china.

We were all ear-strained to the last degree, listening as if our very lives depended on it before we had tiptoed a yard into that room. But none of us expected the sudden shock of surprise which we got. A man was speaking:

". . . can scarcely express the gratitude I feel to you both for the efforts you have made. I shall not forget them. You, Rutherford, I can recompense by advancement, and I will. Mr. Sherman, if there is anything I can do for you . . ."

Lassiter and I, who were ranged shoulder to shoulder, turned, open-mouthed, and stared into each other's eyes, the two most astonished and incredulous

men you could have found in the world at that moment. For the voice we had heard was Mr. Petherwin's—and Mr. Petherwin was actually expressing his gratitude for release to two men, who, in our opinion, nay, in our absolute belief, had been arch-conspirators in the plot that had led to his capture and imprisonment! What new—and cunning—devilry was this?

But Cleaver knew the Chancellor's voice as well as we did, and was just as quick to grasp the situation, and with a sudden exclamation he tore aside the curtains and burst into the other half of the room, with the rest of us at his heels.

It was a pretty picture that we confronted—Mr. Petherwin, bland, smiling, even joyous, more Pickwickian in appearance than ever, at the head of a lavishly spread supper-table, just raising a glass of champagne towards Rutherford on his left and Sherman on his right hand. They were smiling back at him, but the smiles changed to scowls as they turned sharply at the interruption of these amenities, while Mr. Petherwin's benevolent air was transformed into an expression of almost horrified astonishment.

"Are you under the impression, Mr. Petherwin, that these two men have released you from your imprisonment in this house?" demanded Cleaver. "You are being grossly deceived, sir. Here," he went on, motioning to the rest of us, as Rutherford and Sherman half-rose from their chairs, "cover those two. If they move——"

"What—what is this?" asked Mr. Petherwin faintly. "You——"

"I'm a Scotland Yard officer, Mr. Petherwin—Cleaver. Here's another—Sparrow. If you'll think a little, you'll remember both of us. We've been sent down here to effect your release—we find you supping with two men who were in the plot to capture and carry you off. These two——"

"But this is my secretary, Mr. Rutherford!" exclaimed Mr. Petherwin, obviously bewildered beyond measure. "And this——"

"Mr. Sherman, a member of Parliament," interrupted Cleaver sarcastically. "And I dare say they've both pitched the tale to you that by superhuman efforts they discovered your whereabouts? No, sir, they've known your whereabouts all along, and all this is a piece of bluff. These two, sir, came down here to-day to get their share of the money that Mr. Alstone sent for your release; they'd have got it if their agent who was sent to receive it hadn't been accidentally killed. Having failed in that, they've concocted a nice little plot—which has also failed. They got their other associates off—but not far, for the local police will have them safe by this time—and they themselves remained here to bluff you with the idea that they were here as your saviours! That's the truth, Mr. Petherwin—however much they may attempt to deny it."

Mr. Petherwin's face was a study. He looked at

Rutherford; he looked at Sherman. But Rutherford and Sherman were watching us; they looked like caged animals waiting an opportunity to spring—for which reason two, at any rate, of us—Steppe and myself—kept our revolvers very markedly in evidence.

"You shall hear something, Mr. Petherwin," continued Cleaver. He turned towards a half-open door on his right and called loudly: "Mr. Robins!"

A man entered immediately—a middle-aged, meek-looking man, obviously of the butler or head-footman type. He looked deprecatingly at everybody.

"Mr. Robins," said Cleaver, "answer these questions. You were engaged, you and your wife, by the gentlemen who took this house, furnished, for a period? That's correct, eh? How many gentlemen were there?"

"There were three, sir," replied the man in a low voice.

"What did they represent themselves as being?"

"Medical men, sir."

"Do you remember that gentleman, Mr. Petherwin, being brought here?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you understand about him?"

"That it was a mental case, sir—come for treatment."

"In other words, that that gentleman was slightly out of his mind?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, there was a young lady brought, too, at the same time. What about her?"

"Same reason, sir."

"She was mentally defective, too, eh?"

"So I was told, sir."

"And while she was here they'd a lady to look after her, hadn't they?"

"Yes, sir—a lady doctor she was, they told me."

"Where is she now, then?"

"She left soon after the young lady was removed, sir."

"Very well. Now, Robins——"

Sherman broke in, angrily:

"What has all this to do with us? What connection have we with this gang?"

That forced a sharp question to my tongue.

"What were you doing in a room in this house to-night, talking to two of them, Mr. Sherman?" I asked. "I saw you!"

"Negotiating with them, of course!" he answered with a sneer. "Ask Rutherford if I wasn't—and how we came to discover Mr. Petherwin's whereabouts. You're all on the wrong track."

"Utterly!" protested Rutherford. "I'm sorry to say that the dead man, Midford, was a distant relation of mine who, evidently being desperate for money, entered into a plot with two friends of his to carry out this outrage on Mr. Petherwin. I dis-

covered this by reading the accounts of his accidental death——"

Cleaver stopped him with a contemptuous gesture. "That's more bluff, Mr. Petherwin," he said. "Intended for you, sir, but no good to me! I know what I'm talking about, and——"

"I really cannot believe that Mr. Rutherford, my private secretary, and Mr. Sherman, a fellow-member of Parliament, could be guilty of this," interrupted Mr. Petherwin, in a deeply pained voice. "I really think, officer——"

"You may think what you please, sir, with all respect to you," answered Cleaver determinedly, "but I know my duty, and I'm going to take these two men into custody here and now. It's useless for them to remonstrate or show fight—this house is surrounded by police, back and front. So——"

"And pray what are you going to charge us with?" demanded Sherman. "I should advise you to be——"

"Careful, no doubt?" said Cleaver. He turned to Sparrow, who opened the door by which we had entered and admitted a number of local policemen, headed by an inspector. "Certainly, Mr. Sherman, we'll be careful. And as to the charge, it'll be that you are both concerned in the murder of James Mallett at Rumbelow Point! How does that strike you?"

That brought both men to their feet. But while

Rutherford paled, in spite of himself, Sherman flushed with anger.

"That's all damned nonsense!" he exclaimed. "If——"

It was then that Lassiter spoke—having first attracted attention by a gentle and almost ladylike cough, given behind his lifted hand.

"If I might say a word, sir, as a preliminary to the evidence which I shall doubtless be required to give in another place," he said, addressing Mr. Petherwin, as if the Chancellor had been presiding over a court of justice, "I would submit that this is the psychological moment in which to say it. The truth is, sir, I have been in possession of facts which I thought it best to retain until matters came to a crisis. I am able to prove, sir, that when Mr. Rutherford professed to come from town to the Starboard Light Inn on the evening of your disappearance, sir, he did not come from town! Mr. Rutherford, sir, had been staying in the house of Mr. Sherman, close by Rumbelow, for two days and nights. And, touching on the death of the unfortunate man, Mallett, I desire to say that I myself, being at that moment searching for you, sir, saw Mr. Rutherford emerge from the wood in which Mallett was shot, a few minutes after I had heard a shot—and also that I saw Mr. Rutherford bury an automatic pistol in a neighbouring rabbit-warren, to which, in due course, I shall be pleased to conduct the police."

I almost loved Lassiter at that moment. And Lassiter, of course, became an important figure—his evidence was listened to with breathless interest when Rutherford, a few weeks later, stood his trial for murder. There was something curiously impersonal in the way in which Lassiter told his tale. But that tale sent Rutherford to the scaffold.

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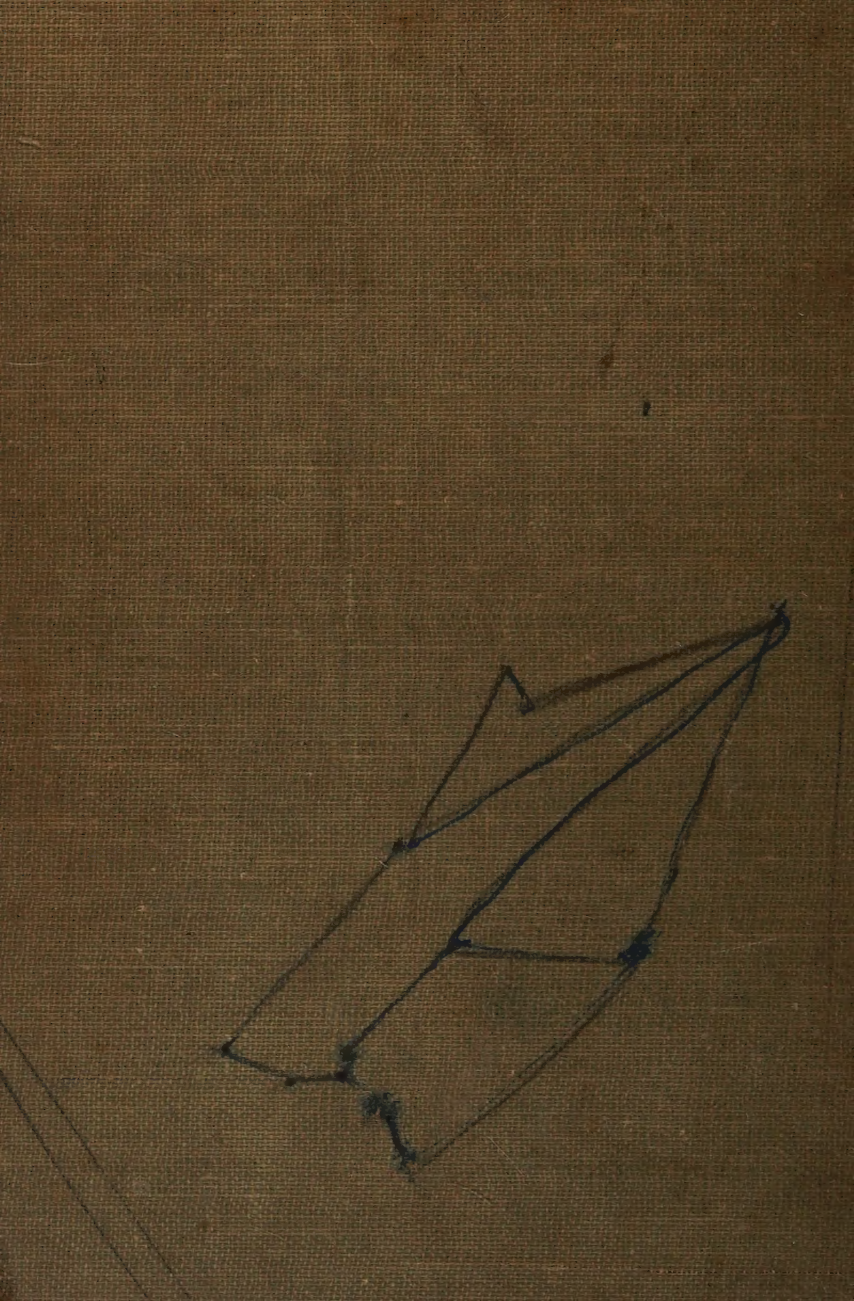
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